KU LEUVEN

FACULTEIT SOCIALE WETENSCHAPPEN

The Dark Ages Imaginary in European Films

Tom VERCRUYSSE

Proefschrift aangeboden tot het verkrijgen van de graad van Doctor in de Sociale Wetenschappen

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Onderzoekseenheid: Instituut voor Mediastudies

2014

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Nr. 262

2014

Samenstelling van de examencommissie:

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Gepubliceerd door:
Faculteit Sociale Wetenschappen - Onderzoekseenheid: Instituut voor Mediastudies [IMS],
KU Leuven, Parkstraat 45 bus 3603- 3000 Leuven, België.

D/2014/8978/9.

Acknowledgements

First of all, I wish to thank my supervisor prof. W. Hesling and my co-supervisor prof. T. Verschaffel for the opportunity to find my way in the academic world. Their constructive feedback has improved the quality of this work. I would also like to thank my jury, prof. B. De Wever, prof. B. Van Gorp, prof. L. Engelen and prof. N. Haydock, for the critical reading of this manuscript. Their work has been a stimulation and an inspiration for me and without it this work would not be as it is.

Kristien Hermans wil ik uitgebreid bedanken voor haar toegewijde en betrouwbare (administratieve) steun bij het maken van dit doctoraat. Hetzelfde geldt voor Ann, Ingrid, en iedereen van de SBIB. Ook het FWO wil ik bedanken voor het aspirantenmandaat dat mij de kans gegeven heeft om aan dit doctoraat te beginnen. Dank ook aan dr. Pascal Vandelanoitte, prof. Roel Vande Winkel, dr. Pascal Lefevere, dra. Silvia Van Aken en dr. Andrew Elliott voor hun constructieve commentaar op vroegere stukken van dit werk.

Ook bedankt aan de (ex-)collega's die over de jaren heen de werkplek tot een aangenaam toeven maakten. In het bijzonder Astrid, Limburgse (t)rots in de branding, Wannes, als medelotgenoot, Sofie, voor de olifanten, en Maarten, padum tsss. Ook de correctoren van dit werk verdienen een momentje in de zon: Nel Bruneel, Siegfried Top, Stijn Dehem, Daan Debuysere en Tommy Mitchell. Dank aan de mensen die zorgden voor de nodige mentale begeleiding naast het werk, zoals daar zijn de moeder en de vader, het opperhoofd, de broeder en de zuster & co. Dank aan Sofie, Jan, Siegfried, (grote) Ellen, Nel, Daan & Manja & co, Stijn & Liesbet & co, Karolien, Wies, Melanie, Elisabeth en Tommy. Ellen, voor alles. Dank ook aan de koffie- en muziekindustrie voor de steun in bittere tijden en Haragei Leuven voor het gericht kanaliseren van de resterende energie. En ten slotte ook nog een woordje van dank aan St. Rita, voor daar waar niets anders meer hielp.

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Prologue

> Adso of Melk: 'I don't like this place.'
> William of Baskerville: 'Really? I find it most stimulating. Come.'
> *The Name of the Rose*, Annaud, 1986.

> Je crains de m'être trop avancé en le disant, car, s'il est une vérité attestée par l'expérience, c'est la bonhomie avec laquelle, en historiographie, on continue de redire pieusement aux générations nouvelles les erreurs dont la science a fait justice depuis longtemps.
> G. Kurth, *Qu'est-ce que le moyen âge?*, 18--, p. 24.

The aim of this study is to identify and describe a specific, coherent and recurring construct of the Middle Ages as the Dark Ages in feature films. In order to avoid confusion with the Anglo-Saxon use of the term 'the Dark Ages', the Dark Ages in this study do not refer to historical 'pre-conquest England' or England before the Norman invasion in 1066 (Robinson, 1984: 750-751). The Dark Ages here refer to the cinematic continuation of a tradition in which the Middle Ages are represented as an age of feudal oppression, intellectual darkness and as a primitive, extreme and disease-ridden world. There is something of a paradox in wanting to return to an age we, as moderns, try to distance ourselves from. Similar to Adso, we do not feel at home in the strange and dark Benedictine abbey of *The Name of the Rose*. Still, his master William of Baskerville finds it a most stimulating place. What, in other words, can be the relevance or the meaning of a Dark Ages world to a contemporary audience? We will analyse what kind of stories are told in a context of the Dark Ages, what elements signify a Dark Ages world, that are at once recognisable and understandable to a modern audience, and how these stories relate to the society during which these films were made. Inspired by De la Bretèque (2004: 12-13), we call this the 'Dark Ages imaginary', or the sum of our beliefs about what constitutes the medieval as a dark age as expressed in feature films. This study is therefore no exercise in medieval studies, but in medievalism, as well as in the field of historical film studies and historical culture in its broader sense.

The main corpus of this study consists of eleven films. We selected Western made feature films, which are set during the Middle Ages and that construct the Middle Ages as a dark age. The corpus consists mainly of films made from the seventies onwards. This will be further addressed in the second chapter.

In the first chapter, the theoretical framework, we situate films on the Dark Ages in the debate on historical films in general. Traditionally, this debate focuses on how to judge the relation between the known historical sources and the way they

have been turned into film. The central question in this debate is whether historiography has to be judged according to the degree of faithfulness to the known historical sources, or whether history can also be adequately conveyed through a filmic discourse consisting of (audio-)visual cues, symbols and metaphors. However, we will demonstrate that what is at stake in films on the Dark Ages are primarily not the historical Middle Ages. In the nineteenth century, Belgian (catholic) historian Godefroid Kurth (1848 – 1916) made a significant observation (see the quote above) when he wrote that despite the fact that science already 'corrected many factual errors' on the Middle Ages, even historiography all too eagerly continued working with what he considered to be outdated *misconceptions* rather than the scientific *truth*.

The Middle Ages in Western culture have a double identity. On the one hand they represent a period of more than a thousand years of essentially Western European history. On the other hand this period has been lifted out of history to serve as a preferred projection screen for modern concerns. Ever since Petrarch (1304-1374) introduced the idea of a 'rupture' in history, as he saw his age to be different – and inferior – to the Glorious Culture of Antiquity, the Middle Ages have been invented and *re*invented to suit the needs of the present. Following Umberto Eco (1987: 65), the medieval is the 'root of all our contemporary "hot" problems, and it is not surprising that we go back to that period every time we ask ourselves about our origin'. In other words, the Middle Ages have become a preferred projection screen for our more fundamental contemporary problems. Essentially, we either feel something is missing in modern society, for which we nostalgically return to an idealised construct of the Middle Ages (e.g. as a harmonious age when man and nature were still one, as the age of the ideal, hierarchical and stable Kingdom or as the 'Age of Chivalry'). Or we despise the Middle Ages as a primitive and dark age, which we have outgrown thanks to modern science and culture. It is the cinematic representation of this second tradition that will be the focus of this study.

We consider films on the Dark Ages to be the continuation of this medievalist tradition that constructs a medieval world to suit the needs of the present. Therefore, in line with this tradition, we will call these films *medievalist films*. We will return to this in the second chapter. In addition, to avoid confusion, in this study we will use the 'Middle Ages' when we refer to the Middle Ages as a historical period, and to the 'medieval' when we refer to a (medievalist) construct of that period.

This tradition that constructs the Middle Ages as the Dark Ages, is consequently not an accurate reflection of the Middle Ages. In response, many historians consider it their duty to 'rectify' these 'misconceptions' and offer their readers insight in the 'real' Middle Ages. Régine Pernoud, for example, in *Lumière du Moyen Âge* (1944), or more famously in *Pour en finir avec le Moyen Âge* (1977), criticised this widespread opinion that the Middle Ages were characterised by

ignorance, stupidity and barbarity, 'même si ce fut la seule époque de sous-développement pendant laquelle on ait bâti des cathédrales!' (Pernoud, 1977: 13; see also Reynolds, 2010: 207; Brown, 2010; Harris and Grigsby, eds., 2008; Kurth, 18--).

But even if historical films, or medievalist films, 'misrepresent' history, they still should be studied. By ignoring these films, we ignore 'the way a huge segment of the population has come to understand the events that comprise history. […] History films, even when we know they are fanciful or ideological renditions of history, have an effect on the way we see the past' (Rosenstone, 2006a: 4 & 5). It is widely accepted that mass media, film and video games in particular, are the largest source of medieval imagery in contemporary society (Raedts, 2011: 354; Sturtevant, 2010: 3; Finke and Shichtman, 2010: 3; D'Arcens, 2009; Haydock, 2008: 7; Kelly, 2004: 17; Williams, 1990: 2). It is also widely accepted that these historical renditions have a significant impact on how society understands history (Voeltz, 2010: 27; Risden, 2009: 290; Hughes-Warrington, 2007: 1; Rosenstone, 2006a: 4; De la Bretèque, 2004: 13 & 19; Downing, 2004: 15-16; Kelly, 2004: 1; Tucher, 2004; Toplin, 2002: 9; Doherty, 2002: 13; Weinstein, 2001: 27; Stoertz, 2000: 37; Roquemore, 2000: xvi; Van Vree, 2000: 109; Rosenzweig and Thelen, 1998: 15-36; Carnes, 1996a: 9; Grindon, 1994: 2; O'Connor, 1990: 2; Toplin, 1988: 1212; Verschaffel, 1987: 15; Raack, 1983: 411; Lerner, 1982: 17; Sorlin, 1980: 4, 1974: 252; Friedman, 1974: 179-180). However, this study does not aim to 'rectify' the 'misconceptions' that are dispersed through medievalist films. By studying these films we aim to enhance the visual literacy and historical understanding of the meaning of the medieval in modern society (see also Raack, 1983: 425):

> Rather than focusing on how film gets the past wrong, or theorizing about what films should do for the past, or how it should reconstruct history, we had better first study the way in which filmmakers have been working for the last century. (Rosenstone, 2003: 65)

In other words, how can we make sense of the medieval in the cinema, or more specifically when the medieval is constructed as the Dark Ages. Studying these films is not about detecting anachronisms or finding errors, but it is about analysing how a cinematic Dark Ages world is constructed, and why this is considered to be relevant to a contemporary audience.

In the third chapter, we will focus on the representation of the Dark Ages as an age of feudalism. Where medievalist films have often been considered to be inherently anti-modern, anti-individualistic and anti-democratic, we argue that this is not the case for films on the Dark Ages. This construct of feudalism, which is related to the debates on the French Revolution in mid-nineteenth-century France, is essentially a leftist, democratic and cosmopolitan discourse. Where in the traditional view it was the Renaissance which ended the Middle Ages, here we will focus on the role of the French Revolution.

In the fourth chapter, we will focus on the Dark Ages as an intellectual Dark Age. Because the Church only believed what is written in the Scriptures, which consequently made any innovation to be a denial of these postulated truths, the worldviews of the Church are represented as artificial. However, due to their central and powerful position in medieval society, they are able to enforce their vision and persecute everyone who stands against it. The symbol par excellence of this persecuting fanaticism is the witch. We will discuss two traditions on representing medieval witchcraft, the rationalist and the romantic tradition. As an answer to these issues, films on the Dark Ages consider the role of education to be of the utmost importance.

In the fifth chapter, the focus lies on the extreme and primitive Dark Ages. In this chapter, the construction and meaning of the Black Death will be discussed. We will focus on the Hebrew and Greek tradition that constructs the plague as a signifier for those elements beyond human rational control, which spread fear and terror in a disintegrating society. In a second tradition, we focus on how the plague has been inscribed in a Hegelian philosophy of history that considers the plague as the necessary evil to get rid of the Middle Ages. The way this tradition has been specifically translated into film is by constructing it as a secular variant of the Great Flood Myth. Finally, in this chapter we discuss the Dark Ages imaginary as a whole.

In a sixth chapter, we offer two case-studies as further explorations on these findings. First, we will reflect on the European character of the Dark Ages imaginary and offer an analysis of an American made film, *Season of the Witch* (Sena 2010). Although this film extensively uses elements of the Dark Ages imaginary, it still constructs a world that can be seen as a representative of the American tradition of the Hollywood Arthuriana (Aronstein, 2005). Second, we will reflect on the narrative and iconographical elements of the imaginary and offer an analysis of *Agora* (Amenabár 2009), in which we claim that despite the fact that the film is set in Late-Antiquity and looks like a *peplum*, it still can be read as a medievalist film constructed according to the Dark Ages imaginary.

I Theoretical Framework

> Let's be blunt and admit it: historical films trouble and disturb professional historians.
> R. Rosenstone, *Visions of the Past*, 1995, p. 45.

According to Airlie (2001: 164), German medieval historians 'reeled in horror' when they were shown fragments of *Knights of the Round Table* (Thorpe 1953) and *Camelot* (Logan 1967) at a symposium in Berlin in 1983. Similar to historical films in general, films on the Middle Ages are usually met with great scepticism and especially a lot of distrust. A telling example of this are two reviews on *Kingdom of Heaven* (Scott 2005), which both appeared in 2004, *before* the film premiered on May 2nd 2005 in London. In an article that appeared in the *Telegraph* on January 18th 2004, Charlotte Edwards quoted eminent crusade historian Jonathan Riley-Smith's opinion on the film:

> Ridiculous […] complete fiction […] dangerous to Arab relations […] **complete and utter nonsense** […]. It sounds absolute balls. It's rubbish. **It's not historically accurate at all**. They refer to the Walter Scott novel The Talisman, which depicts the Muslims as sophisticated and civilised, and the crusaders as brutes and barbarians. It has nothing to do with reality.

About eight months later, while the film was still not released, an article appeared on August 12th by Sharon Waxman of the *New York Times* quoting Muslim scholar Khaled Abu el-Fadl:

> I believe there is a stereotype of the Muslim as constantly stupid, retarded, backward, unable to think in complex forms. It's really annoying at an intellectual level, and it **really misrepresents history on many levels**.

Whether the Muslims were represented as 'sophisticated and civilised' or 'constantly stupid', the one thing both scholars agreed on was that the (upcoming!) film 'really misrepresents history'.[1]

Arguably, the disdain towards historical films is even stronger when it concerns films on the Middle Ages. These films have been accused of being nothing more than a 'rêverie' (Angeli, 1995: 33), 'childish entertainment' (Zink, 1985: 6-8) or attesting of a 'Disnification of the Middle Ages' (Lindley, 1998). According to Shippey (2002: 1) the standard reaction to films on the Middle Ages is to 'dismiss them as

[1] Edwards, C. (2004). 'Ridley Scott's new Crusades film 'panders to Osama bin Laden'. *The Telegraph*, 18 January 2004. http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/northamerica/usa/1452000/Ridley-Scotts-new-Crusades-film-panders-to-Osama-bin-Laden.html. Consulted 11 June 2014.
Waxman, S. (2004). 'Film on Crusades Could Become Hollywood's Next Battleground'. *The New York Times*, 12 August 2004. http://www.nytimes.com/2004/08/12/movies/12crus.html. Consulted 11 June 2014.

simply erroneous, ignorant, even catchpenny'. As Kelly remarked (2012: 528), it is probably no coincidence that of the five major historians who contributed to the issue of the *American Historical Review* of 1988, it was the medieval historian amongst them, David Herlihy, who was most sceptical to historical films. David Williams (1999a: 9) confessed to 'feeling a certain embarrassment when discussing the subject in the presence of fellow professional medievalists' and also recently authors still point out that there 'remains a general dissatisfaction among audiences and scholars alike with the ways that the Middle Ages have been brought to life on the big screen' (Elliott, 2011: 10; see also Bildhauer, 2011: 8; Bildhauer and Bernau, 2009: 1).

The first scholarly attention for films on the Middle Ages started in 1985 with a special issue of *Les Cahiers de la Cinémathèque* (vol. 42/43), entitled *Le moyen age au cinéma*, edited by François Amy De la Bretèque. However, contrary to the debate on the historical films in general, which received a boost in 1988 after the publication of the special issue on historical films in the *American Historical Review*, this was not the case for films dealing with the Middle Ages. With the exception of works by Williams (1990), Harty (eds., 1991) and De la Bretèque (1995, 1996), in 1998 Arthur Lindley still lamented that this subfield 'to date has received woefully little sustained criticism'. In 1999 a special issue in *Film and History* (vol. 29, 1-2) was devoted to films and the Middle Ages (e.g. Williams, 1999a, 1999b; Benson, 1999; Driver, 1999b; Srebnick, 1999) and in the same year Harty published his filmography *The Reel Middle Ages. American, western and eastern European, Middle Eastern, and Asian films about medieval Europe*. However, from the year 2000 onwards, the subfield of medievalist film would become quite popular (e.g. Woods, 2014; Robinson and Clements, eds., 2012; Bildhauer, 2011; Elliott, 2011; Finke and Shichtman, 2010; Haydock and Risden, eds., 2009; Kelly and Pugh, eds., 2009; Bernau and Bildhauer, eds., 2009; Haydock, 2008; Burt, 2008; Dragumirescu, 2008; Ramey and Pugh, eds. 2007; D'Arcens, 2007, eds.; Aronstein, 2005; Driver and Ray, eds., 2004; De la Bretèque, 2004; Aberth, 2003; Austin, 2002; Lindley, 2001; Kawa-Topor, ed., 2001a).

This chapter offers a broad sketch of the general debate on historical films, with special attention for medievalist films. First, we will focus on the cognitive function of historical films, or how historical films relate to the known historical sources. How does a film (re)construct history, how does it present historical arguments and how should the historical value of a film judged? Second, we will focus on the relation between historical films and the society in which they were made. Similar to the study of historiography, these films will (un)consciously reflect the time during which they were made. Without excluding the former two perspectives, we argue that in case of films on the Middle Ages a third perspective has to be included, which is medievalism. More than aiming to reconstruct the (historical) Middle Ages on the screen, we argue that these films are the continuation of a

tradition in which the Middle Ages have been constructed to serve as the preferred projection screen for our modern concerns.

1.1 Medieval history on film

> The peculiarity of historical films is that they are defined according to a discipline that is completely outside the cinema; in fact there is no special term to describe them, and when we speak of them we refer both to the cinema and to history.
>
> P. Sorlin, *The Film in History*, 1980, p. 20.

One of the main characteristics of (historical) feature films is that they present a world to an audience and let them experience that world as if they were *actually* there. The indexical quality of the photographic image already gives the impression that we are looking at a reliable and objective registration of reality, turning the (photo) camera into 'the eye of history' in the words of Mathew Brady (1822-1896) (Van den Berghe, 2011: 8). By adding sound and movement, thereby transforming these images into film, this illusion is enhanced to the point where the audience can be led to believe that they are actual 'witnesses of the past' (Herlihy, 1988: 1189). Barthes famously compared this illusion to the feeling of standing on the 'Balcony of History', watching how history unfolds itself – again – right before his eyes (in Rosenbaum, 1983). Historical films, it would seem, offer everything where historians dreams of. Natalie Zemon Davis (2000: x), for example, compared history on film with a 'performance' where the historian could be 'like an anthropologist observing daily experience, rather than putting an account together from a tax record here, a marriage contract there' (see also Finke and Shichtman, 2010: 6; Raack, 1983: 416).

However, as there are rules for scholars to present their written version of history, there must be rules for filmmakers as well. At stake in this section is the question of how history on the screen should be judged. In other words, the focus lies on the relation between the known historical facts and their audiovisual translation. Here it is not simply about *how* films deal with history, but how they *should* deal with history. Only when a film meets with these demands, it can be called a 'historical film'. When it does not, it usually gets labelled as a 'costume drama' and is considered not to be historically interesting at all (Burgoyne, 2008: 2-5; Cook, 2007a: 291; Baetens, 2002: 345; Higson, 1993: 113; McFarlane, 1988: 156; Eco, 1987: 68-69). But what these exact demands are, is debatable. Davis (1987: 459), for example, defined historical films in terms of their relation to the historical facts. For her, a film can be called 'historical' when they have 'as their central plot documentable events, such as a person's life or a war or revolution, and those with a fictional plot but with a historical setting intrinsic to the action' (for other definitions, see e.g. Voeltz, 2010: 29; Sturtevant, 2010: 18; Burgoyne, 2008: 2 & 4; Grindon, 1994: 2). However, as every historical film will always be a blend between fact and fiction, it will be this tension between the 'documentable' events and the degree to which fiction is still

acceptable, that is the core of the debate (see the concept of 'faction' by Toplin, 2006: 29). Where Davis, for example, considered faithfulness to the sources to be important, Rosenstone (1995: 72) considered films to be 'historical' when they 'engage directly or obliquely, the issues, ideas, data, and arguments of the ongoing discourse of history'. In other words, Rosenstone (1995: 79) does not focus on a faithful relation to the known historical facts, but only refers to a representation that does not violate 'the *overall data and meaning* of what we already know of the past' (italics mine, see also Rosenstone, 2012: 184 & 187, 2006a: 2 & 4, 2004: 29, 1992: 510).

We will present two major perspectives on how the historical value of historical films can be *judged*. Here, the cognitive function of historical films, or in other words how they construct history and present it to the audience, will be discussed. However, as Rosenstone (2003: 63) wrote, 'judgments are made about historical value on widely divergent grounds – accuracy of detail, use of original documents, appropriateness of music, of looks or apparent suitability of an actor to play someone whose body language, voice and gesture we can never know from the historical record'. In other words, there is 'no formula' for rendering historical judgements on a film, and when judgements are made it has to be done on a 'case-by-case-basis' (Rosenstone, 2004: 31; see also Toplin, 1988: 1211). The two major perspectives we offer are therefore theoretical constructs that we have made as mutually exclusive as possible. In the first perspective films have to do exactly the same as what is expected from written historical works: to be as faithful as possible to the known historical facts. A second perspective emphasises that filmic history is not about the literal truth, 'like it really was', but deals with the past in a symbolical and metaphorical way.

1.1.1 The Fidelity Model

> Movies own no immunities, like every other representation of the past, they must answer for their message in the high court of historical criticism.
>
> D. Herlihy, *Am I a Camera*?, 1988, p. 1192.

According to this perspective, historical films are to be judged according to the same standards of scholarly, *written*, historiography. In its simplest form, this tradition claims to offer an objective version of history, based on meticulous and extensive archival research and where the role of the historian remains invisible in the texts he produces. Often quoted in this context are the emblematic lines by Leopold von Ranke (1795-1886) (in De Schyrver, 1997: 12): 'Bloss zeigen, wie es eigentlich gewesen (ist). […] Denn die Warheit kan nur eine sein. […] Unsere Aufgabe ist, uns bloss an das

Object zu halten' (see also Braw, 2007; Gilbert, 1987). According to this perspective, which Burt (2007a: 218) called the 'Fidelity Model of criticism', films should respect history as it was and remain faithful to the known historical sources.

We claim that this is no fruitful way of analysing historical films for it does not take the idiosyncrasies of the medium film into account. We will discuss how (mainstream) film deals with history, and why this does not fit with the 'Fidelity Model'. However, rather than presenting it as *problems* of historical films, or 'filmic sins', we consider these to be *characteristics*.

a) General characteristics of historical films

A film is not a book. Despite the ostensible simplicity of this statement it nonetheless is a crucial point in the debate on historical films. Here we will offer a broad sketch on the main differences between written and filmic historiography. First, we will focus on the differences between a written and an audiovisual form of historiography (the *medium*). Second, we will focus on how the cinema traditionally deals with history (the *genre*). Third, we will make some methodological remarks related to the difference between scholarly historiography and historical films (the *methodology*).

The Medium: Audiovisual History

First, film is often criticised for being a medium that is not suited to present historical arguments. As an audiovisual medium, film conveys meaning through sounds and images to an audience. Where the exact meaning of a word can be found in dictionaries, the meaning of an image is more debatable. Where written texts can explicitly state what the exact motive behind someone's acts was, a film has to suggest this by means of acting, dialogue and sound, of which it is not clear whether or not the audience will interpret it exactly as it was meant by the filmmaker. For example, Rosenstone (2003: 71) gives the example of the French sixteenth century village of Artigat in *Le retour de Martin Guerre* (Vigne 1982), which some considered to be 'too neat […] there was not enough refuse and swill in the streets, […] the peasant looked rather too scrubbed', while others found the same village to be 'oppressively filthy and primitive'. Also Foner (1996: 8, italics mine) illustrates this point by referring to an audience which applauded after the execution of a prisoner, while watching a documentary that tried to give a 'powerful statement *against* capital punishment'.

As Ferro (1973: 109) wrote, the language of the cinema 's'avère inintelligible; comme celui des rêves, il est d'interprétation incertaine' (see also Sorlin, 1980: x-xi). Constructing a clear argument by means of images is much more difficult compared

to using words. This was also the experience of Georges Duby, a respected French historian who brought history to the small screen, but was not happy with the way this turned out:

> Et pourtant, à la projection, je rougis de tant de menues inexactitudes que j'avais laissées passer. Les difficultés sont telles, les résultats si décevants, qu'il s'impose d'inventer des formes d'exposition simples, un langage, des artifices de mise en scène capables de transmettre sobrement l'idée que nous parvenons à nous faire, nous historiens, des cultures et des sociétés d'autrefois. Ces formes ni ce langage n'existent encore. (Duby, 1991: 186)

In other words, images in a historical debate are not suited for offering clear arguments and are consequently considered to be 'necessarily weak carriers of meaning' and only suited for 'auxiliary and […] expendably frivolous illustration' (in Schama, 2004: 23-24). As Jarvie (1978: 377) concludes:

> Film is a very poor and very clumsy medium for presenting argument. […] The main reason for the primacy of paper is that written language is the best medium for rational discussion. […] Writing is vastly superior as a discursive medium. Complex alternatives can be stated and argued concisely and delicately. Film cannot do this. (Jarvie, 1978: 377)

Second, in order to be sure that the audience recognises and understands the images as the filmmaker intended them, films easily use stock-images, symbols or easily recognisable props (Verschaffel, 1987: 83-84). In this respect, Tashiro (2004: 40-44) introduced his 'Law Against Anachronism', which contains three clauses:

1. Filmmakers making films set in the past shall include no objects that could not have appeared in the time period of the story because they were invented later.
2. Filmmakers making films in the past shall include no objects that precede the period of the story's setting.
3. The get-out clause. For important as archaeological research is in producing the period illusion, the need frequently evaporates in the power of a detail to 'read' more effectively than the requirements of a specific situation.

This suggests that as long as a prop is perceived to fit in with the period illusion, filmmakers will get away with it. This easily leads to the critique where filmmakers have more attention for 'visual historicity' than with actual history (Bartholeyns and Bartholeyns, 2000: 32-33; see also La Motte, 2004). It is what Rosenstone (1995: 59-60) labelled 'the baleful Hollywood corollary': 'as long as you get the look right, you may freely invent characters and incidents and do whatever you want to the past to make it more interesting'. Films are being criticised for having too much attention for the look of the past, and in the end paying no respect to the 'otherness' of the past, or for the specific feel or look of a historical period. Moreover, this threatens to create a monolithic period look that filmmakers use in order to be sure that the audience recognises it as the right period. Where in real life nothing is stylistically uniform, where people do wear second-hand clothes and live in old buildings which contain out-dated furniture, films tend to overdo their period look by making everything in

the same style. This results in a 'static look', a monolithic or a 'too perfect' reconstruction of a period (Toplin, 2002: 47-50; Davis, 1987: 461).

Third, where books, in theory, can elaborate on every single detail and can try to be as exhaustive as possible, films are also relatively more restricted in length. Quoting the chorus at the beginning of Branagh's version of Shakespeare's *Henry V* (1989), films must turn 'the accomplishments of many years into an hourglass'. This easily results in films omitting certain aspects or simplifying or condensing the history on a certain event (Levine, 2010; Foner, 1996: 13; Herlihy, 1988: 1192). The trial of Joan of Arc, for example, which historically lasted for more than six months, is condensed into a single day in Dreyer's *La Passion de Jeanne D'Arc* (1928). Also Cecil B. DeMille's *The Crusades* (1935) was meant to be a representation of 'the' Crusades, although the film only focussed on one single campaign. DeMille called this 'telescoping history':

> *The Crusades* is an example of what I have called telescoping history. In historical fact, there were several Crusades extending over two centuries. It would be impossible to tell the story of them all in 12,000 feet of film; and if one tried, the audience would leave the theatre confused, bored, and anxious to tell all their friends to stay away from that breathless dash through medieval history. (DeMille, 1959: 344)

Also dialogue cannot compensate for this loss of information. As Jarvie (1978: 378) wrote: 'Two minutes with a written document and two minutes with a film are totally different orders of load' (see also Toplin, 2002: 18).

Fourth, audiovisual history has a sequential character (Van Vree, 2000: 112), or as Rosenstone calls it 'history as process' which means that where books can divide a story in different chapters, treating different aspects of the same historical event one at a time, films have to bring everything together. Rosenstone (1995: 60-61) gives the example of the character of Bertrande Rols in *Le Retour de Martin Guerre* who is 'at once a peasant, a woman, a wife, a property owner, a mother, a Catholic (but possibly a Protestant), a lover, a resident of Languedoc, a subject of Francis I of France'. Carl Sagan, for example, wrote on this matter when comparing his popular miniseries *Cosmos* (1980) with its book version:

> But books and television series have somewhat different audiences and admit differing approaches. One of the great virtues of a book is that it is possible for the reader to return repeatedly to obscure or difficult passages; this is only beginning to become possible, with the development of videotape and video-disc technology, for television. (Sagan, 1980: xiii)

Where photographs have a more direct or indexical relation to what they portray, and where books make it possible to turn back some pages and reread a section, films are primarily meant to be seen in a flow. This demands another approach than written texts (see Raack, 1983: 413). With the coming of VHS, DVD and streaming, however, it has become more easy to pause, rewind and look again.

Finally, making films is a costly business in which investors will want to see a return on their money. From a historical perspective this suggests that films will often be under a lot of pressure to tell stories the way that they *sell*, which is not necessarily the way it actually happened (Foner, 1996: 22). As a result, films may be tempted to appeal, and please, the biggest possible audience, which means that the original complexity of the historical event can be brought down to the broadest common denominator. This also means that delicate subjects will find it more difficult to get funding, and controversial elements will easily be neglected (Hughes-Warrington, 2007: 68 & 165-186; Guynn, 2006: 2; Van Vree, 2000: 108-113). Only recently, for example, Sacha Baron Cohen quitted his role as Freddy Mercury in the upcoming biopic on the front man of Queen, as the remaining band members wanted a more 'family-friendly' version of Mercury's lifestyle.[2] In other words, according to the critics historical films are only meant to entertain and make money (Carnes, 2004: 45).

The Genre: Narrative History

When feature films deal with history, they usually present history as a story (Hesling, 2001). Presenting historical events in a narrative form implies that certain aspects will be (re-)shaped according to the internal logic of a story. We will present six general conventions of mainstream films based on Toplin (2002: 8-57), Rosenstone (1995: 54-61) and Hugh-Warrington (2007: 18-24).[3]

First, of all the different and often contradicting voices of the past, films tend to simplify the historical data with all its inherent ambivalences and uncertainties into simple and closed stories based on the traditional Aristotelian method of storytelling. This means that out of the available historical data the film will tell a closed story with a beginning (exposition/stasis), a middle (complication/incident) and an end (resolution/new dramatic stasis) (Toplin, 2002: 19-23; McArthur, 1998: 170). This way of structuring a film implies that at the end the issue at stake has been resolved for the better, which should make the audience leave the theatre with a good feeling. No matter how dark the subject matter or how tragically the film ends, no sacrifice is ever in vain and there will always be a silver lining to every dark cloud. Kubrick (in Brody, 2011) made a rather famous remark related to this on *Schindler's List* (Spielberg 1993): 'Think that's about the Holocaust? That was about success, wasn't it? The Holocaust is about six million people who get killed. *Schindler's List* is about

[2] Child, B. (2013). 'Sacha Baron Cohen quits Freddie Mercury Film'. *The Guardian.co.uk*, July 23th 2013. Consulted on July 25th 2013.

[3] The six conventions of Rosenstone, which Hugh-Warrington followed, were (1) history as story, (2) history as the story of individuals, (3) story of a closed, completed and simple past, (4) emotionalising, personalising and dramatising of history, (5) the look of the past and (6) history as process. The structure of these arguments, however, has not been followed here.

600 who don't'. McArthur (1998: 170) called this a 'progressivist conception of history' and Rosenstone (1995: 56) even related it to Marxist history. Hugh-Warrington (2007: 19), however, nuanced this reasoning of Rosenstone as this claim was according to her not based on 'any substantial historical survey but on an anecdotal impression'.

Second, a story is told with the use of characters, which leads to a personification of history (see also Verschaffel, 1987: 71). Nations, evolutions and ideologies have to be given a recognisable face and larger historical evolutions have to be symbolised in the actions of individual characters (Hesling, 2001: 191). More abstract topics, such as macro-economical issues or slow evolutions in demography or agriculture, are difficult to represent in the cinema (Sharpe, 2011: 83; Toplin, 2002: 40). These evolutions will have to be given a face, but this also means that a film is restricted by the boundaries of single lifetime. In other words, many filmic characters have to be seen as a symbol for a larger group. This also implies that their personal problems, emotions and reactions and the way they influence the plot is the main force behind history (Rosenstone, 1995: 57; Grindon, 1994: 8 & 15). This is most visible in the genre of the historical biopic where change is mostly due to the efforts of one man or woman. Yet, this personification of history conflicts with the notion of causality as understood and often debated by professional historians. It is not because human individuals are 'singled out by the camera and appear before us in such a large image on the screen' that their individual actions are the main historical drivers (Rosenstone, 1995: 57). In *King Richard and the Crusaders* (Butler 1954), based on Walter Scott's *The Talisman* (1825), the Crusades are practically represented as a personal conflict between Saladin and Richard I, which can be resolved by fighting a duel between both leaders. The historical context on the third crusade, however, was completely ignored. When discussing change, historians can look for a myriad of possible solutions, from demographic changes, agricultural revolutions, the mentality of the time and, usually in the last place, the individual motives.

Third, in order to appeal to an audience, stories are dramatised. For clarity purposes the story is often made more schematic, making a clear distinction between the 'good' and the 'bad'. Usually, films only choose one side and make it even better than they were in real life and the bad guys even blacker than they were supposed to be. It could be confusing to show the dark sides of the good guys and the better sides of the bad guys because it could make the message less clear. This threat of oversimplification of history is what Toplin (2002: 23-30) called 'partisan views'.

Fourth, where films dramatise a story, they also emotionalise and romanticise stories in order to increase the identification and interest with the audience. This way of working is widespread among film writers as exemplified here in an interview with Marco Tullio Giordana:

> Alors si on raconte 1990 [le mur de Berlin], si vous racontez des personnages, vous pouvez pas partir du mur de Berlin, parce que c'est abstract. Vous n'avez aucune émotion. Mais si vous racontez l'histoire de quelqu'un qui a chercher à passer au-delà du mur et finalement ce jour-là le mur croule, alors ce serait très émotionnant. Mais il faut raconter ce qui a passé cet homme là et les gens qui l'attendez de l'autre côté. On ne peut pas montrer le mur, le mur n'a aucune émotion. Il faut montrer toujours les gens, le cœur, le drame. (Giordana, documentary on *La meglio Gioventú*).

This can conflict with history on two levels. First, this may interfere with the historical data. Filmmakers can add love stories to make history more appealing and therefore change the historical facts by adding romance where this is not supported by the historical sources. Second, it does not go along with the 'nature' of traditional history, which tries to be as objective, cognitive or as detached from its material as possible (Rosenstone, 1995: 59).

Fifth, historical films tend to supersede the particularity of history in order to tell more universal stories or as La Motte (2004: 50) wrote: 'All drama is defined by conflict, usually with moral connotations. That makes every story a parable and every character a symbol for some human condition or principle'. McFarlane and Crofts (in Hughes-Warrington, 2007: 27) considered this particularity of history as a necessary condition in order to speak of a historical film. If the narrative of a film 'could just as well be set in the present or in another time' then they no longer considered it to be an historical film. Then the question could be asked whether or not *Le retour de Martin Guerre* (Vigne 1982) and *Sommersby* (Amiel 1993), two films that tell the same story of a soldier returning from the war claiming to be somebody they are not, are still historical films or rather timeless reflections on human 'identity' (see Humbert, 2001). As it is the historian's duty to let the past be 'strange before its familiar, particular before its universal' (Davis, 1987: 460), this would not be the case in these two films.

Sixth, historical films tend to have a secondary character when relating to history. History as told in film lags behind the cutting edge histories as written by professional historians. Film is generally not the medium to present new archival data or the latest research results.

> But you have to remember that things tend to show up in movies about third: First: historians start working on something and take a look at the record. Their work usually stimulates novelists, and the novelists often stimulate the movie. Finally, things end up on television. (Sayles, in Foner, 1996: 12)

Historical films usually work with the knowledge that already is at hand and then present its own version of it (Downing, 2004: 16; Sorlin, 2001: 37). However, this does not mean that historical films cannot point to a 'specific cohesion that might exist in the data they present (Buunk, 1994: 202 quoted in Hesling, 2001: 189). Additionally, as Downing (2004: 16) points out, this also does not stop films from bridging the academy and mass audiences.

Methodology: footnotes, reflexivity and transparency

The third major issue historians have with historical films is of methodological nature, or more specifically the lack of footnotes, the lack of reflexivity and the lack of transparency. When looking at a historical film there is no direct way of knowing where filmmakers based themselves on to create a certain scene. Some elements may be based on historical sources, others may be invented, but the film will never inform the audience of these changes. Where historians have to be very clear on what specific piece of historical evidence they base their reasoning, every element of a film is presented with same amount of certainty, which does not encourage the viewer to take a critical stance to what is shown on the screen (Herlihy, 1988: 1188 & 1192). This is what Airlie (2001: 164) called turning the viewer into a 'hypnotized voyeur'. There is no room for nuance, for 'maybe', 'perhaps' or filming something that 'could have been' (Davis, 1987: 460 & 480). There is no contestation of the story, no alternatives are presented, no holes in the theory revealed and no possibilities to enter an explicit discussion with other authors (Foner, 1996: 25; Rosenstone, 1995: 57-58; Davis, 1987: 480; Jarvie, 1978: 378). This lack of basic historical methodology becomes most important where it concerns inventions:

> None is more important than the issue of invention. Central to understanding history as drama, this is the key issue. […] The point: the camera's need to fill out the specifics of a particular historical scene, or to create a coherent (and moving) visual sequence, will always ensure large doses of invention in the historical film. (Rosenstone, 1995: 67-68)

Films want to tell closed stories, but the historical data alone can not provide all the information a film requires. History, as Carr (1990: 13) called it, is an enormous jig-saw with a lot of missing parts. Yet, films have to fill these holes of history in order to present a coherent narrative. And as the filmic image can leave no blanks for every little element for which there is no evidence, or in other words the need for a 'thick description', a filmic image will easily include many inventions. Inventions are often seen as 'forgeries' by historians (Bull, 2005: 62; Austin, 2002: 136; Carnes, 1996a: 9; Herlihy, 1988: 1189).

b) 'A Discourse of Loss and Error'

In other words, expecting a film to do exactly the same as written historiography will easily result in disappointment. Not only the 'the very medium seems suspect' (Airlie, 2001: 164), but also the way films tell simplified, embellished or sentimentalised stories, without pointing out where they changed or invented certain elements,

results in a general negative attitude towards historical films (Sharpe, 2011: 83; Levine, 2010; Carnes, 1996a: 9; Herlihy, 1988: 1189). The general advice from scholars to the audience of historical films is: 'Get out of Plato's cave and take a look at reality' (Rosenstone, 2009: 17; this metaphor is also used in Finke and Shichtman, 2010: 6-10). In popular culture as well, analysing films according to their faithfulness to the known historical sources remains by far the most dominant perspective on historical films.[4] And not coincidentally, these reviews often focus on where a film got it 'wrong', resulting in a general 'discourse of loss and error' (see Robert Stam, quoted in Connor, 2007).

However, some nuances have to be made to the abovementioned outline on the distance between historical films and written historiography. Also amongst historians, for example, the notion of 'objectivity' has been challenged as it is widely known that 'facts' do not speak for themselves (Jenkins, 1991: 31-32; Carr, 1990: 23; Löwith, 1949: 5-6). Similar to narrative filmic history, also historians have to connect the 'facts' and implement them into a coherent, readable and meaningful narrative, which Louch (1969: 54) considered to be 'essential to the business of historical explanation' (see also Downing, 2004: 19). This narrative aspect, inevitably, opens the door to interpretation. But this is not necessarily problematic. Cantor (1995: 45), for example, claimed that historical truth 'is ultimately not in the textual details but in the interpretations'. And where the historical sources remain silent, it is not forbidden to speculate on what might have happened (Munslow, 2007b: 521, 2007a). In other words, the water between scholarly historiography and historical films (or novels, for that matter) does not have to be unfathomably deep.

Historical films or novels are not a priori excluded from the possibility of being good historiography (White, 2007: 149; see also De Groot, 2010: 93-138). Historical novels, for example, such as *HhhH* (Binet, 2009: 8), *In het teken van de verzoening* (Bauer, 1998) or *Batavia* (Dash, 2009) create compelling stories that do not contradict the known historical evidence.[5] Even Leopold Von Ranke considered

[4] E.g. HLN, 'Wat wel en niet klopt in 'Saving Mr. Banks''. *HLN.be*, 26 februari 2014. Van der Kolk, T. (2013). 'Dit is de Wikileaks-film waar Assange niet blij mee is'. *De Morgen*, 17/07/2013. Brooks, T. (2013). 'Fact Based films: Bending the Truth'. *BBC.co.uk*, 26 July 2013. http://www.bbc.com/culture/story/20130726-fact-based-films-bend-the-truth. Consulted 23 February 2014. Guglielmo, C. (2013). 'Steve Jobs' Biopic iJOBS Gets it "Totally Wrong," Woz Says". *Forbes*, 24th January. Forbes.com. Consulted on 25/01/2013. Hertzberg, H. (2012). '"Lincoln" v. Lincoln'. *The New Yorker.com*, December 17th 2012. Consulted on July 12th 2013. Brook, T. (2013). 'Fact-based films: Bending the truth'. *BBC.com*, 26 July 2013. http://www.bbc.com/culture/story/20130726-fact-based-films-bend-the-truth. Consulted 7 April 2014.

[5] Bauer, R. (2002). *In het teken van de verzoening: brief van Petrus Venerabilis, een tijdgenoot uit de twaalfde eeuw (ca. 1092-1156).* Kapellen: Pelckmans. Dash, M. (2002). *De ondergang van de Batavia.* Amsterdam: Arbeiderspers. Binet, L. (2009). *HhhH. Himlers hersenen heten Heydrich*. Amsterdam: J.M. Meulenhoff. The idea that facts remain the cornerstone of history, is even made explicit by Binet (2009: 8, see also 242): 'Ik kan alleen maar hopen dat de transparante Spiegel van de historische

history to be a form of literature or at least narratives with a beginning and an end (Braw, 2007: 46; Gilbert, 1987: 396). Elliott (2011: 9-34) thought that the fact that also historians wrote narratives, selected their facts and chose the way they personally linked these facts together ('montage' and 'ideology' as he called it), led to a high convergence between films and history.

There remains, however, a fundamental difference on the level of the historical data itself. Where the facts are sacrosanct for historians, filmmakers or historical novelist are free to change them. Based on this distinction, there is an important difference between scholarly history, and historical *fiction*:

> Van wat de historicus is 'gegeven', wat hij 'vindt'. De data zijn voor de geschiedschrijver uiteraard niet méér dan een gegeven, een vertrekpunt voor zijn constructieve arbeid (uiteraard), maar ze zijn tevens ook onaantastbaar. Op dat niveau, in de data, kan en mag hij niet ingrijpen. Hij verloochent zijn aard, als hij dat zou doen. Historische fictie is nu juist het ingrijpen op dat niveau. (Verschaffel, 1998: 124)

Where historians construct history, based on historical evidence, discuss the relevance and the meaning of these facts within the framework of the larger picture, they cannot change the facts nor can they be vague on the way they produced their results. Historical fiction can interfere on the level of the data. But this does not automatically lead to *bad* history. The question is what is being understood as good historiography: is it purely based on the relation with the facts, or is there room for – responsible – alternative ways of representing history?

There are notable historians who have accepted that historical films always will be a blend between 'fact' and 'fiction', of which Robert Toplin and Nathalie Zemon Davis are amongst the more famous. Both historians took the cinema seriously and wrote extensively on the topic of historical films. However, we argue that these historians still implicitly hold the Fidelity Model to be (the unreachable, but nonetheless) ultimate goal for historical films. Where in the previous section any element of fiction was being condemned, the question here seems to be *how much* fiction is acceptable. Toplin (2006, 2002, 1988), for example, still focussed on 'errors' and 'inaccuracies', but he was willing to 'forgive' these 'minor errors' if the 'larger truth' of the film still made its historical message worthwhile (see also Nadel, 2009: 77). Symbolic is where he compared judging historical films to looking for 'achievements amid the general wreckage':

> While there is substantial evidence of films treating historical subjects superficially, insensitively, or inaccurately, the dismal record does not, in itself, negate film's potential for making contributions to historical study. The challenge is to examine the record of film productions and discern *achievements amid the general wreckage*. (Toplin, 1988: 1211, italics mine)

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werkelijkheid nog doorzichtig zal blijven achter de dikke weerspiegelende laat van idealisering die ik ga aanbrengen in dat fabelachtige verhaal.'

Nathalie Zemon Davis, for example, wrote of her positive experiences as a historian on the set of *Le retour de Martin Guerre* (Vigne 1985), which she considered to be 'in part my invention, but held tightly in check by the voices of the past' (Davis, 1985: 5, see also Kelly, 1984: 254). Still, she remained focussed on the general faithfulness to the historical evidence which she considered to be the most important. In a later article, for example, Davis (2003: 48) praised the stool on which the accused had to sit at the end of *Le Retour de Martin Guerre*, but she called the fact that an audience was allowed in the courtroom, which was not the case in the sixteenth century, to be a '*misleading* view of an important feature of life in Old Regime France'. In her book *Slaves on Screen*, Davis (2000: 136) significantly ended her book with the advice that 'historical films should let the past be the past'.

In the end, it would seem that the eye of the beholder and the tolerance he or she has for historical fiction or what they consider to be the 'larger truth', is an important factor whether or not filmic history is acceptable or not. Where *Braveheart* (Gibson 1995) was criticised as a generally inaccurate film (Canitz, 2004: 127 & 137; McArthur, 1998), Roquemore (2000: 10-12) called *Braveheart* a 'terrific movie, filled with small fictions, but true to the spirit of William Wallace and his grand enterprise', and Kelly (2004: 6) praised the film for 'some realistic elements of medieval warfare and tactics'. Lindley (1998), for example, praised *The Age of Innocence* (Scorsese 1993) to be a good historical film as it 'manages to be both a meticulous recreation of its recent period and a meditation on the evolution of modern sexual mores and visual codes'. Burgoyne (2008: 11-12), on the other hand, while also praising the accuracy in matters of 'setting, costume and class behaviour' criticised *The Age of Innocence* for lacking a 'sense of historical thinking' as well as how it did not focus on how 'actual historical events have an impact on the plot'.

1.1.2 Symbolical or Metaphorical Expression of the Past

Instead of 'tolerating' a certain amount of fiction, as long at it does not violate the 'larger truth' and thus implicitly still related to the fidelity model, Robert Rosenstone was one of the first scholars to accept the notion that films could deal with history on a wholly different way altogether. Where society was changing fast and was permeated with visual images, historiography remained very static and conservative. Instead of reading history from a book, now we could experience history not only in words, but also in sounds and moving images, which alters the way we perceive the past. Rosenstone (2009: 17, 2006: 3) explored the ways in which the filmic historical discourse could be more engaging, or better adapted to the contemporary society.

Influenced by historians such as Hayden White or Frank Ankersmit, Rosenstone claimed that history could also be conveyed through visual images and 'filmic discourse' (see White, 1988: 1193). Comparable to how Carr (1990: 11) called the facts to be the 'necessary condition' of historiography but not its 'essential function', Rosenstone (2004: 30) wrote that the 'truths of historical discourse are not located primarily in the individual details of a work, but in the arguments and metaphors that allow us to think and understand that past'. Historical truth is no longer exclusively to be found in the direct relation with the historical 'facts', but in how it tries to make sense of that past and attributes meaning to it (Rosenstone, 2009: 18). In his landmark essay *History in Images/History in Words: Reflections on the Possibility of Really putting History onto Film* (1988), Robert Rosenstone was the first to accept the idea that the written word was not the only way of understanding the past:

> We must, in short, stop expecting films to do what (we imagine) books to do. Stop expecting them to get the facts right, or to present several sides of an issue, or to give a fair hearing to all the evidence on a topic, or to all the characters or groups represented in a historical situation, or to provide a broad and detailed historical context for events. Stop, also, expecting them to be a mirror of a vanished reality that will show us the past as it really was. (Rosenstone, 2004: 29)

The filmic discourse, compared with written historiography, has its own characteristics and thus has to be treated differently. Condensations, displacements, alterations or inventions that are considered to be 'inaccuracies' or 'distortions' of the historical record according to the Fidelity Model, were now to be accepted as the 'nature and demands of the visual medium itself' (Rosenstone, 1988: 1173). As Rosenstone (1992: 509) claimed, inventions did not necessarily result in *bad* history as also inventions could be *true* 'in that they symbolize, condense, or summarize larger amounts of data; true in that they carry out the overall meaning of the past that can be verified, documented, or reasonably argued'. As long as films 'seriously attempt to make meaning out of the traces left to us from that vanished world' (Rosenstone, 2006a: 3), they could be considered as valuable historical films. In other words, films *can* provide valuable arguments for historical discussion, attribute meaning to the past and engage the larger discourse by criticising the existing body of data, arguments and debates. But contrary to written historiography, films will do this by using symbols and metaphors (Rosenstone, 1995: 77; see also Rosenstone, 2006a: 2).

In order to analyse historical films in this way, first the historical data on the historical event and the arguments and debates surrounding it have to be studied. Then the filmic version is compared with this body of knowledge, not only by comparing the facts with what is visible on the screen, but also on the way the film expresses history symbolically or metaphorically. To give an example of such an analysis we go to Rosenstone's (2001) analysis of *October*, Eisenstein's (1928)

dramatic version of the Russian October Revolution of 1917. At the beginning of the film, the destruction of a statue of the tsar is shown. This scene was criticised for its inaccuracies as the statue was not of tsar Nicolas II, the tsar at the moment of the October Revolution, but of Alexander III. Moreover, these images were not taken in Petrograd where it all took place, but in Moscow. Finally, the real statue was only pulled down in 1921 and not in 1917 as the film suggested. But according to Rosenstone (2001: 18-19), criticising these inaccuracies 'doesn't add to or subtract anything to our understanding of the February Revolution [...] What we do know is that the film is telling us something simple: the collective masses pulled down the Czar in 1917'.

Although this perspective opens the door to accepting historical films as a serious way of dealing with history, in practice this appeared to be more difficult. Where Rosenstone (2006a, 2001, 1996, 1982) praised the historical quality of films such as *October* (Eisenstein 1928), *Reds* (Beatty 1981), *Walker* (Cox 1987) or *Glory* (Zwick 1989), not too many other films could convince him that historical films as a whole could be taken seriously from a historical point of view:

> Davis struggles with the dilemma that troubles all historians (here I certainly include myself) who see film as a potential medium for both effectively telling the past and raising historical questions in new ways – the dilemma of being caught between our hopes and visions of what the dramatic feature might possibly do *for*, and the grim reality of what it all too often does *to*, the past. (Rosenstone, 2002: 135)

Recently, Rosenstone (2009: 18) even wrote that he was 'not all that enamoured of history films'. Historical film, for Rosenstone, seems to be an elitist term to which not many films can comply.

Although Rosenstone's (1988) contribution to the *American Historical Review* provoked a lot of debate and added a new dimension to analysing historical films, this perspective is relatively absent in the debate on films on the Middle Ages. Rosenstone (2003) himself gave an example of how this could be applied to the Middle Ages. He analysed the jousting scene in *A Knight's Tale* (Helgeland 2001), where not only modern music was used, but also a Mexican wave, which both were considered to be 'blatant anachronisms'. However, Rosenstone (2003: 69) read this scene from a different perspective:

> The film, after all, is made for a twenty-first century audience, for people to whom such a tournament [jousting], however exciting, seems no more than a distant, exotic, and bizarre spectacle. To normalize it, to show that in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries such tournaments were wildly popular spectator sports – much like, for Americans, football today – the filmmaker utilizes anachronisms that are so blatant (the MTV reference, the Wave) that nobody could mistake them for an actual historical reference. (Rosenstone, 2003: 69)

However, in some cases authors do discern a form of 'authenticity' in films that is comparable to medieval practices. Levy and Coote (2004: 100), for example, found

Bresson's *Lancelot du Lac* (1974) to be 'following closely in the footsteps of the original medieval poets and authors who themselves used the very amorphous, intangible nature of the Arthurian myth to reconstruct a courtly chivalric world set apart from the real world of feudal society'. According to Thompson (1991: 93-104) the irony that was used in *Monty Python and the Holy Grail* (Gilliam 1991) was for example an authentic characteristic in the Arthurian literary tradition as well (for other examples, see e.g. Paxson, 2007: 190; Blanch and Wasserman, 2001; Driver, 1999a: 5; Angeli, 1995: 37).

1.1.3 Specificity of the Middle Ages

Although films on the Middle Ages represent history on the screen, some authors consider them to be different from other historical films. Aberth (2003: vii), for example, called the Middle Ages 'one of the most difficult eras of history for modern audiences, as well as their cinematic entertainers, to imagine', Williams (1999a: 9) wrote that the medieval past 'plays a role in the cinematic imagination distinctively different from other periods, and often appears to be not all that historical in any direct sense', Higson (2009: 203) wrote that there was 'something specific about the way the premodern past is represented', and Lindley (1998) claimed that it was impossible to deal with history in films when portraying an event *before* the 'break' between the Middle Ages and the Renaissance: 'After that break, you're dealing with history. Before it, you're in the land of archetypes, *Ladyhawke* (USA 1985) country, dreamland'. The question is what, if anything, makes the Middle Ages so vulnerable on the historical side. We argue that historical films on the Middle Ages face two challenges that undermine the historical potential of these films, namely a historiographical challenge and a cinematographical challenge.

a) Historiographical challenge

Authors following the fidelity model assume that 'the Middle Ages' can be reconstructed on the screen. However, if films are to be a perfect historical reconstruction, first a clear image of what the Middle Ages 'really were' is required. In order to get such an image, historical sources are needed. Although the Middle Ages are better documented than for example Antiquity, there still are relatively few historical sources to shed their light on the period. Especially on the period between 400 AD and 800 AD there is not much evidence left (Wickham, 2005: 4 & 7-8; Hugenholtz, 1990: 15; Goffart, 1987). And although from 1100 AD and especially 1200 AD the amount of sources increases significantly (Cantor, 1991: 30), this does

not necessarily lead to a better understanding of the period. Not only can the sources have been altered, mutilated or recycled through time (Bull, 2005: 67), Tuchman (1978: xvii) wrote that 'it may be taken as axiomatic that any statement of fact about the Middle Ages may (and probably will) be met by a statement of the opposite or a different version'. Theilmann and Cate (2007: 371) wrote on the history of the Black Death, a topic we will return to, that 'the only available evidence derives from chronicles and medical treatises [and is] often fragmentary and even misleading; a few mortality records, often oblique in origin; and scant DNA evidence' (see also Biraben and Le Goff, 1969: 1484). In case of written sources, there is often a relative lack in variety. As the Church for a long time had a quasi monopoly on the ability to write, most medieval literary sources are of a religious nature. This could easily lead to an optical illusion or the (mis-)understanding of the Middle Ages as the 'Christian' Middle Ages (Sévillia, 2003: 34; Carr, 1990: 13-14; Van Engen, 1986). This is for example also an issue in the history of the witch trials, which we will return to later in this study, as most trial records are left to us by the inquisition and we know nothing from the accused women themselves (Monter, 1972: 435). Additionally, as medieval man looked differently at the world as we do now, this creates fundamental issues on interpreting these sources from a modern perspective (see also Pugh and Ramey, 2007: 3-4; Hahn, 2001; Bartlett, 2001; Leupin and Bartkowski, 1983).

A similar issue is how to translate the medieval literary sources to the screen (Kelly, 2007: 271; Williams, 1990). As is the case in the Fidelity Model, also in adaptation theory the idea of being faithful to the 'original' is a dominant perspective. This introduces the question of being 'faithful to what?' as for example which, if any, is the 'original text' on King Arthur? Is it to be found in the historical chronicles of Nennius or Geoffrey of Monmouth, or in the legends as written by Malory in *Le Morte D'Arthur*, the Vulgate Cycle, Chrétien de Troyes' *Perceval*, Wolfram von Eschenbach's *Parzifal*, Tennyson's *Idylls of the King*, T.H. White's *The Once and Future King* or yet others (Richards, 1977: 79-91)? This may lead to confusing analyses of films on King Arthur. For example, Vankin and Walen (2005: 315) praised *Excalibur* of all the films on King Arthur to be 'the most faithful to the legend', implicitly referring to Malory's version. However, Lacy (1991: 122) wrote that *Excalibur* 'modifies the story [of Malory] in substantial and significant ways' and concludes that Malory was 'at most a source of inspiration rather than an actual model'. And Aberth (2003: 21-22) found the film to be a 'perfect rendition of Arthur's legend', but criticised the historical aspects as the film omitted the religious elements which is not only an 'anachronism' but was also 'essential to the medieval character of the original'.

Reconstructing the material Middle Ages is yet another issue in order to get a perfectly accurate film. In an interview on the film version of his book *The Name of the Rose*, Eco addressed this issue:

> There is a school in France which undertakes historical research in the detail of the everyday, the realm of material life. My film is a great challenge for these researchers. It is one thing to say, 'They ate off wooden plates,' but when a film-maker wants to know the exact dimensions of those plates…. Or 'They prayed with their foreheads on the floor,' but what did they do with their backsides? Did they stick them in the air or press them into their heels? No historical text and no painting answers these questions. (in Bachmann, 1986: 130)

For example, even if we have the exact texts of the sermons used by thirteenth-century wandering preachers, we still don't know how these speeches were performed, on what location they were held with what response these were met by the people (see Davis, 2010: 75; Vicaire, 1989: 8). Also the archaeological sources are often insufficient, and in case of the larger buildings that are left to us from the Middle Ages, they are either ruins, or in many cases they have been altered or restored in a way that they no longer resemble the medieval 'original' (see Aberth, 2003: 290). Returning to the exact location where the events took place in the Middle Ages can also prove to be disappointing, as Rohmer experienced when filming *Les amours d'Astrée et de Céladon* (2007). The film opens with this text:

> Malheureusement nous n'avons pu situer cette histoire dans la région où l'avait place l'auteur; la plaine du Forez étant maintenant défigurée par l'urbanisation, l'élargissement des routes, le rétrécissement des rivières, la plantation de résineux… Nous avons donc dû choisir, ailleurs en France, comme cadres de cette histoire, des paysages ayant conservé, l'essentiel de leur poésie sauvage et de leur charme bucolique.

Medieval visual sources prove to be problematic as well (Williams, 1990: 7). Filmmakers often rely on contemporary art or paintings in order to create an authentic look for their film, thereby constructing an image of the past through the perspective or the filter of a specific artist (Hugh-Warrington, 2007: 21; Hesling, 2001: 196; Davis, 1987). However, as medieval art did not aim to be mimetic, but consisted of a highly symbolical and especially religious iconography, it is difficult to distil a 'realistic' medieval look. And even if medieval art is visible in film, a modern audience will look at it differently. Rohmer's *Perceval le Gallois* (1978), for example, imitated the medieval visual sources quite literally, but this resulted in an alienating mise-en-scene for which the film was criticised (see for example Airlie, 2001: 170; Angeli, 1995: 35-36). Even documentaries struggle with the lack of visual material to tell a medieval story, as Schama (2004: 30) wrote: 'Taped reconstructions, imprisoned in documentary budgets, make the line between plausibility and giggles perilously fine. […] Even with this cautionary lesson, working on periods such as the Middle Ages, where there is little or no rostrum, and even less in the way of portraits that put faces to the names, it is virtually impossible, however, to do without them.'

We do not claim the impossibility of historiography on the Middle Ages, but just to point out that this may create substantial difficulties in trying to get 'the Middle Ages' accurately on the screen.

Even authors claiming to be sympathetic towards cinematic history struggle when it comes to medieval history. A telling example of this is medieval historian John Aberth's *A Knight at the Movies. Medieval History on Film* (2003) in which he approached medieval films 'from a strictly historical point of view'. In his introduction he acknowledged the fact that films are no scholarly books and that 'such indignities [referring to the filmic sins, see supra, 1.1.1a] committed against history may be forgiven if the overall vision of the film remains true to the spirit of the Middle Ages' (Aberth, 2003: viii, x & xi). But throughout the book it is clear that he struggles with the perspective that focuses on the 'reel' vs. the 'real'. Tellingly, *A Knight at the Movies* is designed according to a historical timeline. The different chapters are ranged chronologically according to theme, starting with early British history on King Arthur and then moving on to the Vikings, the Crusades, Robin Hood, the Black Death and finally Joan of Arc. Every chapter is preceded by a lengthy historiographical status quaestionis related to the topic after which he discusses (or confronts) the filmic treatments of the topic.[6] Aberth (2003: 2) considered this historical background to be essential to understand the filmic renderings or as he wrote in case of King Arthur: 'before one can unmask the modern Arthur, as portrayed on film, it is essential to come to know the medieval one'. Throughout the different analyses, however, it becomes clear that Aberth holds the historical side of the story in much higher esteem than every other filmic parameter. On the history on King Arthur, for example, he considers *The Black Knight* (Garnett 1954) to be a 'complete mess'. He judges the director of *First Knight* (Zucker 1995) to be 'so dismissive […] of history that he is rumoured to have blurted out to a reviewer that he didn't give a "fuck" about the Middle Ages. With a contemptuous attitude such as this, no wonder *First Knight* carries no conviction'. Finally, he laments that *Camelot* has not 'much of anything interesting [to say] about either the history or the legend of King Arthur' (Aberth, 2003: 11, 17, 21 & 22). In other words, although claiming to be sympathetic towards historical films, also Aberth cannot avoid the discourse of loss and error. As Buhler (2005: 292) wrote: 'Aberth's interest in medieval history so far outweighs his interest in film that he often has great difficulty in grasping or communicating which contemporary influences or audience expectations or genre conventions may have most strongly shaped the films he chooses to discuss' (for additional criticism on Aberth, see Salih, 2009: 21 and Haydock, 2008: 5-6).

[6] The title Aberth gives to this historiographical status quaestionis is 'The Background'. Nickolas Haydock (2008: 6) subtly draws attention to the use of a definite article and a singular noun.

b) Cinematographical challenge

> 'I have a degree in medieval art history, and I know that pigs of that period are dark pigs with hair, not the round, clean pigs of today. In *The Return of Martin Guerre*, set in the fifteenth century, there were pink pigs that made me laugh.'
>
> S. Schifman, in an interview with G. Peary, 1988/89, p. 47.

Suppose we do have perfect knowledge of the Middle Ages as they were, and it were possible to turn this into a hundred percent accurate film, would a contemporary audience recognise it as *genuinely* medieval? Paul Zumthor (1992: 3) argued that 'there is vast and unbridgeable gap between us and the Middle Ages', and that it is 'a universe that is no longer familiar with us'. Using the terminology of Bourdieu, it could be expected that the audience does not have enough historical, or more specifically, medieval capital to understand what would be shown on the screen (Sturtevant, 2010: 264; Giffney and O'Rourke, 2009: xii; Haydock, 2008: 26-27; De la Bretèque, 2004: 17; Lindley, 1998, 2001a: 96; Brown, 2000: 548; Boureau, 1995: 9).[7] Would a modern audience, for example, know how the legal system in France worked during the fifteenth century, how wars were fought or be able to recognise beauty as medieval man saw it (Eco, 2011: 563, 2004: 99-175; Woods, 2002: 62-63; Van Uytven, 1998: 84-119)? According to Williams (1990: 4) the 'real problem of rendering the past on film', besides the historiographical challenge, is the necessity of making the past 'communicate with the present audience' which means that this 'unfamiliar world [i.e. the Middle Ages] must be recognizable to us'.

The challenge for filmmakers is to create images that are at once convincing, recognisable and understandable as being 'medieval' to a contemporary audience (Kané, 1974-1975). As Eco suggests, in order to create a 'medieval' world, the knowledge of the audience has to be taken into account:

> Actually, I believe the period can be better represented by reproduction. Take church doorways: they used to be painted, but today they are colourless and covered with the patina of time; which makes it all very romantic, but doesn't reproduce the feeling of the epoch. In the year 1000, there was a famous saying: 'Europe is being covered by a white mantle of churches.' Today these have become grey churches. Authenticity may be more readily achieved by faking. (in Bachmann, 1986: 130)

In other words, instead of representing medieval churches as they were, films choose to present 'churches' as they are now in order to make sure that the audience recognises it as such. Elliot (2011: 3 & 89) called this strategy a 'semiotic paradox' as 'to retain the concept while forsaking the form'. In the more provocative version of

[7] A small-scale (n= 19) focus-group study by Sturtevant did find that the respondents were 'insecure in their knowledge of the period', frequent held 'temporal and geographical misconceptions', were 'prone to anachronistic thinking' and did not think of the Middle Ages as 'personally relevant' (Sturtevant, 2010: 264).

Angeli (1995: 39) it is 'le maximum de fausseté pour atteindre le maximum de vraisemblance'.

But then again, more often than not there is not enough historical material at hands. In other words there is a high need for not-authentic material that still carries the meaning 'medieval'. Related to the issue of the static look (see supra 1.1.1a, pp. 11-12), the challenge for filmmakers is to create images of which they think the audience will recognise/understand and accept as 'medieval'. This is what Woods (2004: 41) called 'perceptual realism', or in the more negative wording of Lindley (2001b: 98) 'surface realism' (see also Walker, 2012: 149; Salih, 2009: 20). However, following De la Bretèque (2004: 12-13), we will relate this to the medieval imaginary.

c) The Medieval Imaginary ('L'imaginaire médiéval')

Filmmakers are primarily not looking to create authentic medieval worlds, but worlds of which they think the audience will understand and recognise as being medieval. 'Realism' or 'authenticity' in a medievalist film is in other words a 'pacte de créance' or a 'belief contract' between the filmmaker and the audience (Elliott, 2011: 43; Driver and Ray, 2004a: 6 & 20-21; Williams, 1990: 4). These elements are no indices of historical accuracy, but 'a world, a surrogate experience which we have agreed to recognize as medieval' (Woods, 2014: 3-4). This is what De la Bretèque (2004: 12-13) called 'l'imaginaire médiéval' (or 'the medieval imaginary' as translated by Elliott, 2011: 4). Essentially it comes down to a wide stock of signifiers meant to evoke or trigger the signified 'medieval' in the mind of the audience. It are images which we have learned to link with medieval times, which De la Bretèque calls 'iconogrammes' (or 'historicons'). This is comparable to Barthes' (1970) example of the 'insistent fringe' as an instant meaning of 'Roman-ness'. Examples of these historicons are castles, swords, dragons, the Bayeux-tapestry or even bad teeth and physical deformity can be used to signify the medieval. Also the language used by the actors, as for example a kind of mock archaic English or a blend between Shakespeare and the King James Bible is sometimes applied. Also typical passages that are usually included in medieval films, or 'figures obligées', such as the tournaments, jousting or banquet scenes can serve this purpose (De la Bretèque, 2004: 21 & 35, 1985; see also Elliott, 2011; Salih, 2009; Burt, 2007a, 2007b; Bull, 2005: 137-138; Bull, 2005; Woods, 2004: 42-43; McArthur, 1998; Williams, 1990a: 6; Zink, 1985).

In other words, the Middle Ages in the cinema are not only reconstructed based on a historical referent, but are also constructed using already available signifiers for the medieval. These signifiers are based on the broader cultural-historical tradition on representing the Middle Ages (see infra on 'medievalism', 1.3). However, these signs are easily lifted out of their historical context to become a

generic sign for the medieval. As Haydock (2008: 11-12) pointed out, it is in fact no real problem to include the Crusades, the plague and the Peasant Revolt in one single film as *Monty Python and the Holy Grail* demonstrates. *Robin Hood Prince of Thieves*, for example, used the Bayeux-tapestry at the beginning of the film which had nothing to do with the time in which the film was set, but only served to anchor the viewer in 'the Middle Ages' (Salih, 2009: 28; Burt, 2007b; Kelly, 2004: 7). This is what is referred to as 'hyperrealism' or 'hypermedievalism' when a film contains more medieval elements than there ever were at one single moment during the Middle Ages (Eco, 1987; see also Paden, 1998: 300-301).

Arguably, when audiences claim that a film is not 'realist', they mean that their expectations based on prior experiences of the period are not met (Woods, 2004: 42 & 47). Therefore filmmakers easily use images that have proven their value in other films to create their own medieval cinematic world (De la Bretèque 2004: 35; Bildhauer, 2011: 13; Sturtevant, 2010: 6). This consequently threatens to reduce a thousand years of Western history into a 'singular unchanging entity' (Elliott, 2011: 178) or a 'generic premodern place (Higson, 2009: 208). Bildhauer (2011: 15) claims that because medieval films keep repeating and re-using the same elements, this has given medieval film the bad reputation of being a 'simple' genre.

Despite this criticism, medievalist films will try to convince their audience that they are watching real history. There are many strategies that films apply to gain historical trustworthiness (for an overview, see Burt, 2007a: 217-218, see also Ramsey, 2013: 59; Bildhauer, 2011: 120) In interviews, for example, filmmakers easily emphasise the amount of research that went into the film and how this makes the film truly authentic – usually immediately followed by a statement indicating that despite all this the film is not a documentary (see Lindley, 2007: 19). In the filmic text as well, filmmakers try to convince their audience of their trustworthiness. Take, for example, *La Passion de Jeanne d'Arc* (Dreyer 1928). According to Margolis (1997: 41), this was one of the first films to explicitly add the name of a historical advisor, in this case the leading Jeanne d'Arc scholar Pierre Champion, to the credits of the film. Next, the films offers the following text to the viewer:

***La Passion de Jeanne D'Arc* (Dreyer 1928)**

> Dans la bibliothèque de la Chambre des Députés à Paris se trouve l'un des documents les plus extraordinaires de l'histoire du monde : le procès-verbal rédigé Durant le procès de Jeanne d'Arc, procès qui aboutit à sa condamnation et sa mort. Les questions des juges et les réponses de Jeanne y sont consignées avec grande exactitude. A la lecture nous découvrons Jeanne telle qu'elle était – non pas avec casque et cuirasse – mais simple et humaine… une jeune femme qui mourut pour son pays. Et nous sommes témoins d'un

> drame impressionnant - une jeune femme croyante, confrontée à une cohorte de théologiens aveuglés et de juristes chevronnés.

After this text the film cuts to 'the facts' where – supposedly – a historian is reading the report of the trial (see image). Here, the film is, as Burt (2007a) describes, trying to relate itself with older and more trusted media, in case written archival documents. By doing this the film tries to achieve a halo effect and inherit some of the authenticity and trustworthiness that is usually ascribed to this other medium.[8] In addition, by including these archival shots it could also be argued that the film links itself to the documentary genre. However, as Margolis (1997: 471-473) wrote, there is no evidence of any contact between Dreyer and Pierre Champion, which suggests that Dreyer used his name for the effect only. Additionally, the archival document shown in the film is not the document in the Chambres des Députés it claims to be. In addition, it does not resemble *any* of the five major historical documents that are left on the Jeanne d'Arc trial. It is not clear which book is shown at the beginning of the film, but it is not the book the film claims it to be.

Sometimes filmmakers go quite far in claiming historical authenticity. On the film poster of *King Arthur* (Fuqua 2004), for example, we can read 'The Untold True Story That Inspired the Legend', on the poster of *Beowulf & Grendel* (Gunnarsson 2006) we can read 'Beneath the Legend lies the Tale' and *Robin Hood* (Scott 2010) claims to offer 'The untold story behind the legend'. Certain films are even claiming to present the historical truth, *despite* what historians have said on the matter. Take, for example, *Pope Joan* (Wortmann 2009), a film which is literally about re-inscribing the history of the female pope in the history books of the church, where she had been scraped out. As the bishop of Paris tells the audience at the beginning of the film:

> How could it have been otherwise? That a woman once occupied the papal throne was a disgrace to the church. Of course Johanna wasn't mentioned in the chronicles of the pope. But was there to be truly no evidence of her existence? Was she to be banished from history all together? A woman who had accomplished so much.

After these lines, we literally see how this Bishop starts writing a new section and adds the story of Joan into the history books of the Church. It is this story of Joan which we see re-enacted in the film. Also in *Braveheart* (Gibson 1995), it is claimed that the film will for the first time tell the real history of William Wallace, because before the official stories were written by the English, Wallace's enemies:

> I shall tell you of William Wallace. Historians from England will say I am a liar. But history is written by those who have hanged heroes.

[8] Also in the novel *The Name of the Rose*, Eco uses the cultural topos of claiming to have found his source text which he will tell (Eco, 2011: 533-534, see also Taussat, 2001: 263). Moreover, also the film presents itself as the visualisation of the written memories of a trusted monk. Also *Pope Joan* is essentially the visualisation of what the bishop of Paris is writing down in her history of the church.

These claims make films on the Middle Ages a fortiori vulnerable to criticism. Canitz (2004: 127), for example called the 'false truths claims' made by *The Messenger* and *Braveheart* intended to 'mask tendentious ideological messages' and considered the films to be covert propaganda. There are many reasons why films on the Middle Ages still present themselves as presenting history as it was. Paradoxically, it could be stated that while historical films are met with a general distrust amongst the audience, the people still expect to see a film represent history as it was. This is related to what Neale (1990: 47-48) called the 'ideology of realism'. If a film wants to be taken seriously, it has to be perceived as being realist. Filmic genres that are not seen as 'realist', such as horror or science fiction, are easily 'misunderstood' or even 'despised'. Additionally, when a story is said to be true, it immediately becomes more attractive and inspirational as it gives 'the story a certain legitimacy in the audiences mind' (Sayles, quoted in Foner, 1996: 17; see also Bildhauer, 2011: 20; Vankin and Walen, 2005: xv). It would also be paradoxical and confusing to see a historical film, that explicitly claims not to deal with the past (Lindley, 2007: 19).

1.1.4 Conclusion

Film is an audiovisual medium that deals differently with history than written historiography. For example, as an audiovisual medium it is more difficult for films to construct historical arguments compared with writing. Filmic history is also essentially narrative history, implying that films often condense, alter or invent historical data in order to tell a compelling and closed story. Moreover, films do not inform their viewer where these changes have been made and present everything with the same amount of certitude. This freedom to alter historical data is what makes historical films, similar to for example historical novels or images, into historical fiction. However, this does not necessarily result in *bad* history. Some historians are tolerant to a certain amount of fiction, as long as it does not violate the larger truth, although this means that remaining as faithful as possible to the facts remains the implicit norm. An approach that is more open to filmic history is used by Rosenstone who, instead of focusing on how films represent the facts, focuses on how the film expresses history. Judging a historical film, for Rosenstone, is about how a historical film engages with the larger discourses of history and presents its arguments through metaphors and symbols.

Both approaches, however, are not the best suited to analyse films on the Middle Ages. Films on the Middle Ages are not only historically challenged, but connecting this period to a modern audience offers an additional cinematographical challenge to filmmakers. In order to bridge the distance between the historical Middle

Ages and a contemporary audience, films rely on a medieval imaginary in order to be sure that the audience will recognise and understand filmic images as being medieval. We will therefore not read films on the Middle Ages from a purely historical point of view, or according to the Fidelity Model, which leads all too easily into disappointment and a discourse of loss (Bildhauer and Bernau, 2009: 1; Giffney and O'Rourke, 2009: xi; Haydock, 2008: 6, 2007: 243; De la Bretèque, 2004: 17 & 38-39; Lindley, 1998).

However, before discussing the second major perspective on historical films, there are some aspects related to historical films on which everybody agrees. First, while perhaps not being accurate, films do keep (medieval) 'history and heroes alive, topical, and under discussion' (Driver, 1999: 5; see also Engelen, 2007: 561, 2005: 1; Hugh-Warrington, 2007: 30-31; Davis, 2003: 45; Driver, 1999a: 5). How many people would have heard today of the Crimean war (1854-1856) were it not for *Charge of the Light Brigade* (Richardson 1968), Oskar Schindler thanks to Spielberg (1995) or the historical character of El Cid in the filmic version of Anthony Mann (1961)? Historical films can raise awareness like the miniseries *Roots* (1977) *Holocaust* (1978) or *Nuit et Brouillard* (Resnais 1955) and provoke a lot of debate (see Rosenstone, 2006a: 4, 2004: 32; Davis, 2003: 48). However, as Toplin (2007: 234) wrote, films perhaps cannot 'bring closure to discussions about history. But they do have the potential to open them'. And even authors who distrust historical films accept the idea that people might be inspired by a film to look for how it really was – and open a book (Butler et al., 2009: 1167; Bull, 2005: 7; Kelly, 2004: 8; Davis, 2003: 46-47; Aberth, 2003: ix-x; Austin, 2002: 138; Toplin, 2002: 41, 1988: 1213 & 1215; Carnes, 1996a: 10, 1996b: 206; Herlihy, 1988: 1192; Kelly, 1984: 254).

Second, as films ask other historical questions, especially related to motivations and psychology (Davis, 1985: viii), films could provoke discussion and lead to additional insights (Rosenstone, 2009: 21; Kelly, 2004: 5; Driver, 1999a: 5; Raack, 1983: 412). Films ask to 'imagine the past' which in turn can 'enable the historical imagination' (Austin, 2002: 136), or 'freshen our historical perspectives' (Driver, 1999: 5). It is history as 'thought experiment' (Davis, 2000: xi) where historians can 'speculate past imponderables […] freed from proof' (Aberth, 2003: ix):

> Films may not deliver precisely the gift of understanding that we expect of written scholarship, but they show exciting potential for providing their own insights. As a stimulus for thought and feeling, as a visual text addressing broad problems, as a foray into historiography, or as a sensitive reconstruction of times, places, people, and events, film can promote new ideas. (Toplin, 1988: 1226)

Third, the pedagogical value of films has early on been recognised as teaching material or as a good way to introduce students to the complex historical events

(Giffney and O'Rourke, 2009: xii; Driver, 2007; Grindley, 2007: 140-153; Kelly 2004: 17; Driver 2004b: 211-212; Ganim 2004; Smith, 1976b: 2).

1.2 Modern concerns on a medieval stage

Where the previous section focused on the relation between the filmic representation and the known historical facts, in this section the focus will lie on the filmic representation and the time during which the film was made (*presentism*). Broadly speaking, two elements will be discussed here. First, as is the case for every (historical) product, historical films will bear the marks of the time during which they were made. Second, the perspective will be discussed which claims that films on the Middle Ages are not trying to reconstruct the past, but are using the medieval as a pretext to comment on the present.

1.2.1 Historical Films as a 'Social Document'

> The study of the cinema considered as a document of social history, that, without neglecting the political or economic base, aims primarily at illuminating the way in which individuals and groups of people understand their own time.
>
> P. Sorlin, *The Film in History*, 1980, p. 3.

While it was, and in fact still is, difficult for historians to accept historical films as a legitimate medium for offering historical argument, its value as a historical artefact was much earlier on recognised. According to Smith (1976b: 2) and Raack (1983: 413), historians became interested in films from 1968 onwards as can be seen in the first publications which appeared on this topic, such as *Film and History* (°1971-), Wenden's *The Birth of the Movies* (1974) and Smith's *The Historian and film* (1976a). According to Sorlin (1980: 4 & 6, 1974: 252) this was the result of the growing influence of television and its potential impact on its viewers, which created the need to study audiovisual material. At that moment it became more clear that historians have no monopoly on studying and disseminating historical information. So in order not to be banned to the sideline, historians started studying this new kind of history (Sorlin, 1980: 4-5). From then on it became more accepted for historians to use audiovisual material as a historical source to study the society in which they were made. In the beginning historians, however, preferred the newsreel or historical documentaries over feature films. As Raack (1983: 413) wrote 'Archival film and sound, especially actuality material – i.e. film recording some real happening – is the natural habitat of historians'.

Long before historians would take feature films seriously, there already were voices that advocated the historical value of films as a historical source.[9] Filmmakers such as Sir Arthur Elton, W.K.L. Dickson or Matuszewski and journals like *Cahiers du Cinéma*, *Jump Cut* or *Cinéaste*, already treated political films as a documents of their time (Guynn, 2006: 7; Grindon, 1994: 4; Smith, 1976b: 1). Most famous, however, is Kracauer's seminal *From Caligari to Hitler* (1946) in which he claimed: 'This book is not concerned with German films merely for their own sake; rather, it aims at increasing our knowledge of pre-Hitler Germany in a specific way'. By studying films Kracauer believed that he could reveal 'deep psychological dispositions predominant in Germany from 1918 to 1933' based on 'hidden clues to hidden mental processes' he could detect in the worlds depicted on the screen (Kracauer, 1947: v & 7-8). In fact, according to Kracauer (1947: 5), films were the perfect material for this as films were 'never the product of an individual' and were also made to 'appeal to the anonymous multitude'. As a result the collective unconsciousness found its most clear expression in film (see also Raack, 1983: 414). However, the specific methodology which Kracauer applied was early on criticised for being too vague (see e.g. Fearing, 1947: 76-79).

The first professional historian to take feature films seriously was Marc Ferro, who was called the 'founding father' of historical films studies by Rosenstone (2002: 134, see also Guynn, 2006: 7). In his first article on this subject, *Société du XXe siècle et histoire cinématographique* (1968), Ferro already criticised historians for neglecting the cinema as a historical source on the twentieth century. Where historians would not leave a page in the archives unturned, they turned their backs to the invaluable source of cinematic documents. Ferro drew attention to the fact that a film unconsciously revealed more than it explicitly showed on the screen. Instead of analysing the plot or the explicit message of the film, Ferro was looking for those smaller elements which could be taken as a symbol for deeper-lying beliefs: 'On apprend ainsi ce qui intéresse un artiste ou une société, les faits qu'elle juge dignes de conserver en mémoire; on apprend ce qui la scandalise, l'émeut ou la passionne. On

[9] It is not unusual that it takes time before new media are acknowledged, understood and accepted. As there often already is a lot of written material to use as sources on the twentieth century, the question is what historians would gain by focusing the new medium of film. In addition there were issues of more practical nature as films required technological knowledge and often costly equipment which was no simple matter before the coming of VHS or DVD (Raack, 1983: 422-423; Sorlin, 1980: 5; Smith, 1976b: 3-5). However, the main reason why historical films have been ignored by historians was – and in a way extent still is – the low status of the cinema (Jarvie, 1978: 374 & 396; Smith, 1976b: 4-5). In the words of Georges Duhamel the cinema was valued as 'une machine d'abêtissement et de dissolution, un passe-temps d'illettrés, de créatures misérables abusées par leur besogne' (Quoted in Ferro, 1973: 111) which made the cinema the preferred medium for vulgar mass-entertainment. The history shown on the screen was according to the norms and standards of contemporary historiography no 'good' history and according to some films were not even considered as a legitimate historical source on the time their production as historians found films to be 'too imaginary and escapist to have a meaning relation to their time of production' (Guynn, 2006: 7).

découvre également l'échelle de ses valeurs; celles qu'elle assume, celles qu'elle ignore' (Ferro, 1968: 581-582, 1977: 13). In his own words, he was looking for a…

> … *lapsus* d'un créateur, d'une idéologie, d'une société constituent des révélateurs privilégiés. […] Ils peuvent se produire à tous les niveaux du film, comme dans sa relation avec la société. Leur repérage, celui des concordances et discordances avec l'idéologie, aident à découvrir le latent derrière l'apparent, le non-visible au travers du visible. Il y là matière à une autre histoire, qui ne prétend, certes pas, constituer un bel ensemble ordonné et rationnel, comme l'Histoire; elle contribuerait plutôt à l'affiner, ou à le détruire. (Ferro, 1973: 114)

For example, Ferro found arguments in the way Rosenthal, the Jew, was represented in *La Grande Illusion* that suggested latent anti-Semitism and in *Chapeav* (Geori and Sergei Vasilyev 1935) he found indications of a latent critique of Stalinist justice (Guynn, 2006: 9; see also Ferro, 1973: 115-124).

A second influential historian who took fiction film as a serious historical source, was Pierre Sorlin. Similar to Ferro, he criticised the English scholars (e.g. Wenden and Smith) who did not take the feature film, including films representing history, seriously. According to Sorlin (1980: xvii-ix) historical films were a good source to describe 'how men living at a certain time understood their own history'. However, the historical message of the film was certainly not to be studied for what it said on the past:

> Here, we are going to analyse 'historical films', and the first thing we must do is forget, as far as possible, everything we know about the periods dealt with: thereafter we will be able to understand what the people who made these films, and the people who saw them, thought of as 'history'. (Sorlin, 1980: viii)

Historical films for Sorlin (1980: ix) were only a 'useful device to speak of the present' because they reflected 'how men living at a certain time understood their own history' which enabled him to 'reflect on the use of historical understanding in the life of a society'. A famous example of this is *The Birth of a Nation* (Griffith 1915) and the way it represented the American Civil War. Where the film in its days was considered to be an accurate reflection of history, today it is widely recognised that the film clearly shows the virulent racism that characterised American society at the time. Where Woodrow Wilson famously praised the film as 'writing history with lightning. And my only regret is that is all so terribly true', in 2004 the film was elected as the 'worst historical film ever' (in Cinéaste, 2004: 69).

The fact that every historical product necessarily reflects, at least to some degree, the contemporary concerns of the society in which it was made, is not surprising. Also every historical product, including medieval history, can be linked to its production context. Cantor (1991: 37) wrote, for example, 'we cannot interpret medieval culture or any historical culture except through the prism of the dominant concepts of our own thought world' (see also Carr, 1990: 22). As a reviewer on

Patrick Geary's *The Myth of Nations: The Medieval Origins of Europe* (2002), for example, commented:

> Although bookstores will undoubtedly place this book in the history section Patrick J. Geary, a professor of history at UCLA, who has written extensively on Europe during the Middle Ages, is really aiming to participate in the contemporary political debate regarding nationalism. In an introduction lamenting the collapse of Gorbachev-era hopes for a united Europe, he grimly surveys the rhetoric of Haider and Le Pen. (McFall, 2002: 35)

Consequently the socio-economical or cultural and political context during which films on the Middle Ages were made, will be reflected in these films as well. The link between the sixties and *A Walk with Love and Death* (Huston 1969) cannot be neglected as the film's 'spirit is animated by the passionate but easily exploited idealism of the student and hippie generation' (M.B., 2008: 87). *The Adventures of Robin Hood* (Curtiz 1938) was clearly influenced by sombre undertones related to the 1930's when 'Nazi conquest of Europe threatened, pits the good, resistant natives against a foreign oppressor who has conquered their land, and who is referred to through the parallels drawn by the studios between the strict hierarchy of power and stiffness of the Normans and those of the Nazi's' (Ortenberg, 2006: 202; see also Airlie, 2001: 180). *The Black Knight* (Garnett 1954) was best read in the context of the 'red scare' (Aberth, 2003: 13-16) and *El Cid* (Mann 1961) reflected concerns related to Spanish national politics as well as the American concerns related to the Cold War and the civil rights movement of the late 1950's and early 1960's (Harty, 2009: 161-166).

Also in the choice of topics, the influence of contemporary society may be visible. There was no coincidence, for example, that the historical interest in Jeanne d'Arc rose exponentially during the nineteenth century – four centuries after her death. Not only was it the time of the 'gothic revival', but more importantly, France needed a national hero after having been painfully defeated by the Germans in 1870. This also reinvigorated the appeal for Jeanne d'Arc in the arts (Pernoud, 1981: 122-125). Comparable, the recent attention for the Crusades in the cinema is related to the present day struggles and tensions in the Middle East (e.g. D'Arcens, 2009b). After 9/11, and especially when George W. Bush used the word 'crusade' in a public speech, the idea of the Crusades became relevant once again. Arguably it was *Kingdom of Heaven* (Scott 2005), the first Western cinematic depiction of the Crusades since David Butler's *King Richard and the Crusaders* (1954), who led the dance and made it a hot topic in the cinema (e.g. *The Da Vinci Code*, Howard 2006; *Arn Tempelriddaren*, Flinth 2006; or *Season of the Witch*, Sena 2011). This is also reflected in the amount of research on films related to the Crusades (e.g. Haydock and Risden, eds., 2009), who all depart from the idea that the representation of the Crusades is at least partly a reflection of the current situation (Haydock, 2009a: 1; see also Lindley, 2007).

However, it could be argued that this presentist aspect of historical films is by no means unique to film on the Middle Ages as every historical product is influenced by the time in which it was made (e.g. Grindon, 1994: 1-3). And yet, there are authors who claim that the situation for films on the Middle Ages is different.

1.2.2 History by Analogy: 'The Ahistoricism of medieval film'

> We tend to figure Western history in terms of break between medieval and Renaissance in which the latter is the beginning of modernity and the former of that which is discarded: what Carl Rubino has called 'the despised and rejected 'Middle Ages', the period defined as an unreal era between two real ones. It is the Other that doesn't lead to us. After that break, you're dealing with history. Before it, you're in the land of archetypes, *Ladyhawke* (USA 1985) country, dreamland.
>
> A. Lindley, *The ahistoricism of medieval film*, 1998.

Arthur Lindley, in his provocative and widely read essay *The Ahistoricism of medieval film* (1998, see also Lindley, 2001, 2007), claimed that while in theory there is no difference between films representing medieval or modern history, in practice this was not the case. A film like *The Age of Innocence* (Scorsese 1993), which he also praised for its historically accurate design, could offer a 'meditation on the evolution of the modern sexual mores and visual codes'. A film like *The Seventh Seal*, on the contrary, was not about Swedish history anno 1349 but was set in 'Beckett-time (that is, Any-or No-time)', located on a beach 'midway between T.S. Elliot and Neville Shute' or 'nevernever-but-always-land'. Read according to this perspective, a film like *MacBeth* (Welles 1948) had nothing to do with the Middle Ages, but was an 'estranged version of the political concerns of the late 1940's or even an abstract "Fascism-Land"' and *Braveheart* (Gibson 1995) is really only about 'Ireland and the rest of the Celtic fringe in the 1990s, prominently including Scotland' or even 'the continuation of football [Euro 96] by other means' (Lindley, 1998, 2001b: 99). Films on the Middle Ages, in other words, were no 'meticulous recreations' of their time, but there showed a 'denial of historical process and connection'. The Middle Ages were not the signified, but merely the signifier (see also Salih, 2009: 22). In other words, where 'films of more recent history offer relevance by evolution, medieval films offer relevance by analogy' (see also Haydock, 2009a: 3; Bildhauer and Bernau, 2009: 8; Lindley, 2007: 21). Lindley (1998), however, saw no reason why films on the Middle Ages could not offer history as evolution, but 'in my experience, they don't'.

The idea that films on the Middle Ages, in fact, have nothing to do with the historical Middle Ages is quite widespread. Where the story may be set in a medieval

context, it is contemporary society which is being addressed. According to Burger and Kruger (2009: 240) 'movies that take up medieval material tell us as much or more about their own moments as about the medieval past they reinterpret'. Also D'Arcens (2009) wrote that we can 'learn much about the preoccupations of modernity […] much more than we can ever learn about the European past itself'. And Austin (2002: 136-137) called medieval films to be 'modernity in drag' and 'profoundly modern creations [which] tend to reflect the anxieties and preoccupations of their modern creators rather than those of people who lived a thousand years ago' (see also Driver, 2004a).

Some authors explicitly consider this presentist perspective to be what makes studying films on the Middle Ages worthwhile. In *Race, class, and gender in "medieval cinema"* (Ramey and Pugh, eds. 2007), Pugh and Ramey (2007: 1) claimed in their introduction that 'when cinema meets history, the very meaning of "history" appears to crumble under the pressure to translate the truth of the past into the media of the present'. As a result 'directors often employ history – including the events and narratives of the Middle Ages – to advance their own contemporary artistic and political visions'. In other words, 'medieval films more accurately delineate postmodern concerns than any fidelity to medieval sources' (ib.: 2). Pugh and Ramey (2007: 3) concluded 'for this reason, the chapters in this book directly address the "big three" contemporary concerns that are most likely to provoke charges of presentism: race, class and gender'. Not coincidentally these three inherently modern concepts of race, class and gender are of the most difficult concepts to historically understand in a medieval context (see e.g. Bartlett, 2001; Hahn, 2001). By studying these concepts in a cinematic medieval world, Pugh and Ramey were studying how we, as moderns, understand these concepts. A similar approach is taken by *Queer Movie Medievalisms* (Kelly and Pugh, eds., 2009a). Kelly and Pugh (2009b: 1) wrote in their introduction that 'period films attempt to re-create the past, but can only do so through a revisioning that inevitably replicates modernity and its concerns'. When elements of 'queer past, queer present, and queer future' merges with film of the Middle Ages 'they address issues of gender and sexuality relevant to contemporary audiences yet nonetheless mediated through a fictionalized and historicized past' (Ib.: 1).

1.2.3 Conclusion

> Que le Moyen Âge du cinéma est un lieu imaginaire où se projettent des représentations émanant de la société contemporaine de la réalisation des films, d'abord. *Cependant, il ne faudrait pas s'arrêter là*. Il n'est pas qu'un prétexte pour parler du présent, même s'il est toujours un peu cela. Mais les films médiévaux comme tous les films historiques sont aussi support d'un discours sur l'Histoire.
>
> F.A. De la Bretèque, *L'imaginaire médiéval*, 2004, p. 12. (italics mine)

As every historical product, films on the Middle Ages reflect, at least partly, the time during which they were made. However, even more than is the case with films set in recent periods, critics argue that films on the Middle Ages have no meaningful link whatsoever with the (medieval) period they represent. The medieval in these films is seen as a pretext, as a signifier or a vehicle to address the present which is the true signified. The question then becomes if the medieval is interchangeable with any other historical period represented on the screen. Even if a film aims to address the present, it cannot be neglected that they do this through the past. As Driver (1999b: 5) wrote films on the Middle Ages are 'multivalenced' (see also the Bildhauer and Bernau, 2009: 1; Dragomirescu, 2008: 25; Paxson, 2007: 295; De la Breteque, 2004: 12; Driver and Ray, 2004a: 7; Welsh, 1998: 315). By exclusively focusing on the presentist meaning of a film, this does not answer the question why we return to the Middle Ages, and not another historical period, to ask ourselves certain questions about the present. What is the continuing appeal of medieval stories, and why do these still matter (Ginters, 2009; Haydock, 2008: 29; Paden, 2004: 93; McConnell, 1979: 3)? In order to answer this question, we need to include the tradition of medievalism in analysing films on the Middle Ages.

1.3 The medieval*ist* 'Other'

> If the Middle Ages hadn't existed, people might have had to invent them, just so that we could safely be non-medieval, and have someplace exotic to fly to when modern life got too, well, modern. Or so that we could have a convenient Other against which to define ourselves.
>
> C. Brown, *In the Middle*, 2000, pp. 549-550.

At least from a European perspective, the Middle Ages are more than just a historical period. When we look at the Middle Ages, we are looking back at ourselves, at the cradle or the infancy of modern western society and culture (Le Goff in Kawa-Topor, 2001b: 10; Lecoy de la Marche, 1887: ii; Kurth, 18--: 41, 45 & 52). Although Lord Acton (quoted in Harty, 1999: 3) famously wrote that European culture stands on two pillars, referring to Antiquity and the Middle Ages, we no longer connect with Antiquity. As Godefroid Kurth (18--: 54-55) wrote, we pray 'dans la Sainte Chapelle plus volontiers que dans le Parthénon' (this is echoed in Eco, 1987: 65 & 66-67). On two different levels, as 'survival' and as 'revival', the Middle Ages are still visible in modern society (Ortenberg, 2006: 1-25). First, there is the 'survival' of the Middle Ages, or the direct historical remains of the Middle Ages in modern society such as for example the universities, parliament, the current nation states or the modern European languages (Hugenholtz, 1990: 12; Harp, Mantingh and Rappoldt, 1990). Second, and more important in the debate on film, the Middle Ages have continually been revived and reinvented to function as a 'distant mirror' (Tuchman, 1978), or the 'Other' against which we, as non-medievals, could define ourselves (Brown, 2000: 547; see also Blockmans, 1988: 7). The Middle Ages are at once far enough removed from us to freely project our modern concerns on it, yet close enough to understand that it is about our history. This makes the Middle Ages into the perfect Significant Other for Modernity.

Studying this continual process of the 'post-medieval representation of the medieval' is what is being referred to as 'medievalism' (Kelly and Pugh, 2009b: 12). This, however, is never a neutral process as Harty (1999: 3) emphasises that it transforms the medieval 'into a useful discourse out of which can be produced ideologies and practices which comment upon or contest other contemporary beliefs' (see also Pugh and Weisl, 2013: 1; Utz, 2011: 101; Matthews, 2011: 698 & 704-712; Marshall, 2007b: 2; Utz and Shippey, 1998: 2; Reuter, 1998: 28; Miltenburg, 1996b: 27; Bloch and Nichols, 1996: 4).

The idea that 'the Middle Ages' were a post-medieval invention to serve contemporary needs can be taken quite literally as the term itself is the result of a two-fold negative definition of what the period is not (Bull, 2005: 55-57). According

to this definition, the Middle Ages have no own 'merit' or distinguishing quality other than being an intermediary age between two glorified periods of history: Antiquity and the Renaissance. However, nobody living between 500 AD and 1500 AD thought of himself as living in 'the Middle Ages' as we understand it today. When Augustine of Hippo (354-430) wrote that he was living 'in hoc interim sæculo' or Julian of Toledo (642-690) mentioned a 'tempus medium', they were referring to the period between the Incarnation and Judgement Day and not, as well as they could not be, referring to the period between Antiquity and the Renaissance. It was Petrarch (1302-1374) who is widely believed to have been the first to introduce the idea of a rupture between his own age and the age that separated him from his beloved Antiquity. The Middle Ages then literally became the time that lay in-between, or media tempora, media tempestas, media aetas or medium aevum (Matthews, 2011: 697; Reuter, 1998: 27; Robinson, 1984: 748-749). However, it would not be until the seventeenth century, and generally attributed to the German historian Christophorus Cellarius (1638-1707), before the Middle Ages were really considered to be a historical era on its own (this is contested by Bull, 2005: 47). In the nineteenth century the traditional tripartite division of history into Antiquity, Middle Ages and Modernity became the norm (Reuter, 1998: 27; De Schryver, 1997: 217; Green, 1992: 13; Hollister, 1991: 7).

1.3.1 The Middle Ages and Medievalism

> Puisque l'erreur ne cesse d'être engendrée et conservée par la définition, c'est à la définition que je veux m'attaquer pour monter jusqu'à quel point elle est elle-même fallacieuse et vaine.
>
> G. Kurth, *Qu'est-ce que le Moyen Age ?*, 18--, p. 29.

> Since the Middle Ages have always been messed up in order to meet the vital requirements of different periods, it was impossible for them to be always messed up about in the same way. So I'll try to outline at least ten types of Middle Ages, to warn readers that every time one speaks of a dream of the Middle Ages, one should first ask which Middle Ages one is dreaming of.
>
> U. Eco, *Dreaming the Middle Ages*, 1987, p. 68.

As a historical concept the 'Middle Ages' is a problematic concept as it is often more related with ideology than with empirical evidence (Matthews, 2011: 709; Green, 1995: 13-14; Dufays, 1987; Halecki, 1950: 25-61). In this section we will offer different perspectives on how the Middle Ages as a historical period have been demarcated.

From a political perspective, the Middle Ages usually start with the fall of the Western Roman Empire. This can be in 410 when Rome was sacked by the Visigoth

Alaric, in 455 when Rome was sacked by the Vandal Geiseric or in 476 when the Roman Emperor Romulus Augustulus died. The Middle Ages then ended together with the Hundred Years War in 1453 as at this point the borders of the major nations in Western Europe received their more or less definitive form. The same date, 1453, can also refer to the fall of Constantinople symbolising the end of the Eastern Roman Empire. From a religious perspective the Middle Ages could start with the death of Emperor Constantine (272-337 AD), as he first officially tolerated Christianity with the edict of Milan in 313 AD, or, in 391 AD when Christianity was proclaimed state religion by Theodosius I. The Middle Ages then ended in 1517 when Luther nailed his Ninety-Five Theses to the door of the church in Wittenberg and once and for all divided Christianity (Burr, 1913: 710-726). From a cultural perspective the Middle Ages started after the fall of Antiquity, in this case often specifically symbolised in the destruction of the Great Alexandrian Library by fire in 391 AD. The Middle Ages ended thanks to the 'astounding achievements of the human spirit' (Eco, 1987: 66), referring to the invention of print by Gutenberg in 1439, the discovery of America by Columbus in 1492, or the rise of humanism and the Renaissance in general. Finally, there are also significant national(istic) differences as for example it could be said that the French Middle Ages started when Clovis was baptised in 496, or also in 987 when Hugo Capet became King of France and started the Capetian Dynasty. Similarly, England ends their Middle Ages with the death of the last Plantagenet King Richard III in 1485 (Bull, 2005: 48).

Without going into detail here, many of these abovementioned claims are ideologically inspired and are from an empirical point of view often highly debatable (see for example Haskins, 1995; Andrea, 1992: 187; Phillips and Phillips, 1992: 1; Panofsky, 1944: 223). As each of these perspectives implicitly refers to a monolithic unchanging entity of a thousand years, this is easily empirically flawed. An often used remedy to this issue is by making sub-divisions. In France, for example, 'le Moyen Âge' has been divided into the *haut Moyen Âge* (476 AD – 1000 AD), *Moyen Âge central* (1000 AD – 1300 AD) and *bas Moyen Âge* (1300 AD – 1400 AD), while England divides their Middle Ages into the *Early* (600 AD – 1066 AD), *High* (1066 AD – 1272 AD) and *Late Middle Ages* (1272 AD – 1485 AD). However, not only is the specific understanding of these subdivisions also dependent on the national history, but this still implies the existence of an overarching concept of 'the Middle Ages' (Bull, 2005: 54; Robinson, 1984: 750). Additionally, these concepts of the 'Middle Ages' are an exclusively Eurocentric division of history. Where in the abovementioned cultural perspective there was cultural darkness after the fall of the Roman empire, it was the time when Islamic culture flourished (Arkoun, 1978: 121-123). Or where we, from a Western perspective, remember Saladin mostly as the adversary of Richard I during the third crusade, in Arabic culture he is mostly remembered for uniting the world of Islam after abolishing the Fatimid Caliphate (Lewis, 2004: 235; Maalouf, 1984: 7).

Is it then, in short, even still meaningful to work with a concept like the Middle Ages (see Bull, 2005: 60; Eco, 1987)? Again, without going into detail, historians such as for example Pirenne, Gerhard, Le Goff, or Hollister have offered other divisions of Western-European history based on empirical evidence.[10]

However, this is not what is at stake in this study. Comparable to these abovementioned perspectives of the Middle Ages, films on the Middle Ages construct the medieval not as a historical period, but as an ideological construct. From this perspective the Middle Ages have been lifted out of history and represented as a monolithic entity that lasted for over a thousand years. Based on the contemporary situation, the Middle Ages have served as the preferred Other to compare ourselves with. It would lead us too far to give an overarching overview on the medievalist tradition in general (see e.g. Pugh and Weisl, 2013; Montoya, 2013; Raedts, 2011; Matthews, 2011; Utz, 2011; Reynolds, 2010; Eisenbichler, ed., 2009; Stedman, 2008; Marshall, ed., 2007a; Ortenberg, 2006; Bull, 2005: 14; Utz and Swan, 2004; Simmons, 2001; Utz and Shippey, 1998; Amalvi, 1996; Bloch and Nichols, eds., 1996; Blockmans, 1988; Pernoud, 1977: 15). Instead we will present the outlines of the dual identity in the history of medievalism: the medieval as the Dark Ages on which we look back with disdain or a more romanticised construct of the Middle Ages as a lost Golden Age without all modern problems.

As mentioned above, it was Petrarch (1304-1374) who created the notion of a rupture between Antiquity and his present time. However, compared to the glorious culture of Antiquity, Petrarch found himself living in a dark age. This idea paved the way for a tradition that considered the Middle Ages, as a whole, to be far inferior. During the Enlightenment, the Middle Ages came to stand for an age of intellectual darkness, obscurantism and superstition. These ideas were again reinforced during the nineteenth century with the coming of positivism. Essentially, in this tradition we construct the Middle Ages as an ignorant age as a way to congratulate ourselves on what we have outgrown. We praise modern cultural and intellectual progress by emphasising from what a primitive state we have emerged.

For example, especially scholasticism has served as a symbol for the lack or absurdity of medieval scientific thought. Scholasticism has 'routinely been condemned as medieval vestiges of an anti-intellectual world: pedantic at best, pointless at worst' (Novikoff, 2012: 331). Historically, however, the scholastic

[10] Take for example the division by Gerhard (1956): he called the period from the eleventh to the eighteenth century 'Old Europe', characterised by 'forces tending in the direction of change, of centralization, of equality, by the power of tradition, by strong regional and local attachment, by the corporate setup of society'. Then there was the Enlightenment and the French Revolution which led to 'Modern Europe': 'In this period the forces of political centralization (national or supranational, democratic or totalitarian), of social equality, of intellectual and economic changes are more dominant than at any previous period.'

tradition originated in the twelfth century, and was partly responsible for the Renaissance of the Twelfth Century. Famous scholastic thinkers are for example Peter Abelard (1079-1142), William Ockham (ca. 1287-1347) and Thomas Aquinas (1225-1274). Essentially scholasticism was a tradition based on a disputation method that juxtaposed seemingly contradictory extracts from the Scriptures from which they tried to (hyper)rationally deduct the deeper truth. First a thesis (queastio) was made, followed by a counter thesis (responsio) and then the author offered a list of arguments which would bring him closer to the truth (Raiswell, 2008: 125). It has been called 'the best part […] of mediaeval philosophy' (Hope, 1936: 445-446) and had a major influence on Western thought for a long time. However, this kind of reasoning was already mocked by Erasmus (1466-1536) as he posed the questions of how long Christ had spent in the womb of Mary or if the omnipotence of God could make it possible for Him to hate his own son (Chomarat, 1990: 18). During the Enlightenment scholasticism became representative for the Middle Ages as a whole characterised by a 'form of thinking essentially theological and based on formal ratiocination' (Biard, 2000: 257). William Robertson (1721-1793), for example, famously described scholasticism in his introduction to *The History of the Reign of the Emperor Charles V* (1769) as 'over-curious speculations' which 'the limited faculties of the human mind are unable to comprehend' and thus Robertson considered Christianity, and scholasticism as 'the most essential part of it', as 'the theories of a vain philosophy' (Robertson, 1829: 38; see also Raedts, 2011: 82). This mocking of medieval scholasticism is perhaps made most notorious by Isaac Disraeli (1766-1848), father of Benjamin Disraeli, who after reading the scholastic works of Thomas Aquinas on the issue of the corporeality of Angels asked 'how many angels can dance on the point of a very fine needle, without jostling one another' (Raiswell, 2008: 124). Even today the word is used in a similar meaning. In a discussion on the quality of American universities, for example, an author (Mead, 2011: 300, 2010: 404) explicitly criticised academic research as being too scholastic, meaning that it had become 'too narrow and artificial, out of touch with social realities and of interest mainly to other academics'.

While the Middle Ages from the fourteenth century onwards were inscribed in a tradition that looked down on the period, especially from the eighteenth century onwards another tradition rose which nostalgically looked back on the Middle Ages. Mostly related to the Industrial Revolution, and linked to the rise of Romanticism, the medieval was no longer the barbaric predecessor of the modern, but became a place of real and untempered feelings and harmony with nature. As Ortenberg (2006: xi) wrote: 'From the start, escapism has been one of the major elements of the fascination with the medieval, with the desire to escape away from the harsh realities of the present and be allowed to take refuge into a world where reason gives way to emotion, reality to imagination' (see also Simons, 1998: 44). As industrialised society

was perceived to be cold, mechanic and fragmented, people yearned for a simpler past when mankind lived in harmony with himself, society and nature. Especially in the arts, as a clear example of the Gothic Revival, the medieval became the antidote to modernity (Ganim, 1996: 148-167; Raedts, 2011; Miltenburg, 1996a: 7; Blaas, 1996: 53; Matthews, 2011: 697 & 699).

After the French Revolution (1789), however, this romanticised construct of the medieval became more political, which was also visible in the arts (e.g. Sir Walter Scott, Thomas Carlyle, William Ruskin or William Morris). In the context of high political instability with the Revolution and the Napoleonic wars, conservatism was on the rise in Europe. Especially in England, the Middle Ages were now recreated as a time of the King, the nation and the knights. Not coincidentally, during that period Sir Thomas Malory's *Le Morte D'Arthur*, focusing on the chivalric world of Arthur and the Round Table, became reprinted for the first time in almost two-hundred years (Simmons, 2001: 1-28; Morris, 1984; Girouard, 1981: 179 & 182-184; Chandler, 1965: 315-332). In France, especially after 1870 when they were defeated by the Germans, an idealised and romanticised medieval past had to remedy for everything that went wrong in contemporary society. In the second half of the nineteenth century glorious medieval events, such as the heroism in the *Chanson de Roland*, the decisive French victory over the English in Bouvines in 1214 or the role of Jeanne d'Arc as the saviour of France became important. On the other hand, and mainly in France, pro-revolutionaries simultaneously constructed a medieval times when the King and the nobility were abusing and exploiting the common people (Raedts, 2011: 207; Emery, 2001: 99-114; Amalvi, 1996: 230-241; Kendrick, 1996: 95-126; Graham, 1996: 57-94).

1.3.2 Films and Medievalism

> Le Moyen Âge est à une distance suffisante de nous pour qu'il pose aux nations occidentales les questions fondamentales sur son rapport à son histoire. Ni trop près, ce qui empêcherait le recul, ni trop loin, ce qui le transformerait en période 'froide' où l'on ne peut pas s'investir.
>
> F.A. De la Bretèque, *L'imaginaire médiévale*, 2004, pp. 12-13.

It did not take long after the invention of film before medieval stories entered the cinema. In 1904 Edwin Porter made a version of Wagner's *Parsifal* for Edison, in an attempt to capitalise on the opera's popularity after it had been staged at the Metropolitan Opera in New York the year before. In 1909 Charles Kent made a version of *Launcelot and Eleaiene* for Vitagraph, which was an adaptation of the

Victorian poetry of Tennyson's *The Idylls of the King* (Harty, 1995b: 3-5). In other words, this new medium was continuing the process of reinventing and adapting medieval stories. Following Eco (1987: 68), 'since the Middle Ages have always been messed up in order to meet the vital requirements of different periods, it was impossible for them to be always messed up about in the same way'. As we will discuss here, this not only ensured the continuation of old traditions, but the cinema would add traditions on its own as well.

Similar to the definition of medievalism as mentioned above, most authors agree that also films construct the Middle Ages as a 'space for reflection' (Kelly and Pugh, 2009b: 10) thereby functioning as the 'preferred setting for exploring on the silver screen some of society's deepest concerns', or as the 'temporal Other to modernity' (Pugh and Ramey, 2007: 1 & 5; see also Bildhauer, 2011: 10; Finke and Shichtman, 2010: 4, 8 & 13; Sturtevant, 2010: 1; Trigg, 2009; Giffney and O'Rourke, 2009: xi; Kelly and Pugh, 2009b: 2; Lindley, 2007: 26; Aronstein, 2005: 11; De la Bretèque, 2004: 13; Paden, 2004: 92-93; Aberth, 2003: 217; Harty, 1999: 3).

There are different approaches to study medievalist films. The following division is merely for analysis' sake as the authors who we will give as an example often work with different perspectives. Earlier in this chapter a historical perspective on medievalist films was already discussed (see Aberth, 2003) as well as a presentist focus that approached medievalist films from queer theory (see Kelly and Pugh, eds., 2009a) or from modern concepts such as race, class and gender (see Ramey and Pugh, eds. 2007).

Another approach is studying these films by chronology, as for example De la Bretèque (1990) studied the French medievalist cinema from 1940 till 1987 or Haydock's article on 'Arthurian Melodrama, Chaucerian Spectacle, and the Waywardness of Cinematic Pastiche' (2002), based on the 'medievalism of American popular cinema during the past six years' (Ib.: 5).

Other authors approach medievalist films from a thematical perspective, as for example by focusing on the Arthurian tradition in the cinema. Kevin Harty's (ed.) *Cinema Arthuriana. Essays on Arthurian Film* (1991a), for example, offered a broad scope on the 'range of approaches' in which different directors have brought the Arthurian legends to the screen (Harty, 1991b: xiii, 1991c: 3; see also Harty, ed., 2010). Also Martha Driver and Sid Ray (eds., 2004), in the *Medieval Hero on Screen. Representations from Beowulf to Buffy* focussed on the representation of the hero in medievalist films: 'the essays in this book explore the ways in which filmic representations of medieval heroes differ from historical and literary ones and theorize the reasons for and meaning of those differences […] as a way of learning how our culture perceives and pays homage to cultures of the past' (Driver and Ray, 2004b: 6). Kawa-Topor (ed., 2001a) in *Le Moyen Age vu par le cinéma européen*, offers a range of different European films on the Middle Ages.

Other authors offer a more broad overview on the diversity of medievalist films. Nickolas Haydock in his *Movie Medievalism: the Imaginary Middle Ages* (2008) looks a at medievalist films 'through the lenses of Lacanian psychoanalysis and the Deleuzian philosophy of the time-image (Haydock, 2008: 2). Based on multiple case studies, he offers a comprehensive and thorough view on the diversity and versatility of the relation between the medieval and the modern in medievalist films (see e.g. Marshall, 2013). Finke and Shichtman in their *Cinematic Illuminations. The Middle Ages on Film* (2010) offer a 'wide range of mostly canonical films set in the Middle Ages' (Burt, 2012: 546; see also Sturtevant, 2011: 339). Bettina Bildhauer in *Filming the Middle Ages* (2013) approached these films from a purely filmic perspective, or more specifically through genre. In 2004 De la Bretèque's vast, thorough and encompassing *L'imaginaire médiéval dans le cinéma occidental* was published. This work has been praised by Harty (2005: 83) as, for now being 'the definitive study of Western 'medieval cinema'' (see also Deploige, 2006: 606-609). In our study on the Dark Ages imaginary, we will often refer to this work.

In this study, we will focus on the construction of a specific medieval world on the screen. In other words, how does the medieval world look like, what kind of stories are told in it and how does this relate to contemporary society. In his famous essay *Dreaming the Middle Ages*, Eco (1987: 68-72) for example, famously sketched out 'ten little Middle Ages' or ten different ways in which the Middle Ages were reconstructed in contemporary society. He claimed that the Middle Ages have always been 'messed up in order to meet the vital requirements of different period, it was impossible for them to be always messed about in the same way'. His ten little Middle Ages the Middle Ages were: (1) as a pretext; (2) as an ironical revisitation; (3) as a barbaric age; (4) as an age of Romanticism; (5) as the age of the philosophia perennis; (6) as the age of national identities; (7) as the age of Decadentism; (8) the age of philological reconstruction; (9) the age of the so-called Tradition and (10) the age of the expectation of the Millennium.

In his filmography *The Reel Middle Ages*, Kevin Harty (1999: 5-8) translated these ten categories exclusively for film. However, as Eco's general taxonomy was not only made for film, we argue that Harty's translation is quite artificial and not convincing. We will give two examples of Harty's filmic ten little Middle Ages. First, the Middle Ages as a 'pretext' was for Eco were there is 'no real interest in the historical background; the Middle Ages are taken as a sort of mythological stage on which to place contemporary characters'. Harty translated this category exclusively as a political category, close to propaganda, where the 'reflection of the contemporary' is clearly visible. He gives examples such as Nazi Germany's appropriation of Jeanne d'Arc in *Das Mädchen Johanna* (Ucicky 1935), the hidden meaning related to the French resistance in *Les Visiteurs du Soir* (Carné 1942) or the Russian propaganda in *Alexander Nevsky* (Eisenstein 1938). Second, Eco's category of

the *Philosophia perennis* is about medieval philosophical thinking which still lingers in our modern thoughts in clerical thinking. This is for example visible in the pastoral and dogmatic views of Pius XII and John Paul II but 'can also be perceived, as transparent source of inspiration, behind many kinds of formal and logical thinking in contemporary secular philosophers'. Harty translated this category as films who approach the Middle Ages in a philosophical way such as *The Seventh Seal* (Bergman 1957), Bresson's *The Trail of Joan of Arc* (1962) or *Lancelot du Lac* (1974) and also *The Name of the Rose* (Annaud 1986) is included in this category.

We argue that some of Eco's categories are not really suited to approach medievalist films, which is visible in the way Harty almost re-defines Eco's categories. Although Harty (1999: 5) acknowledged that his categories were not 'mutually exclusive' and may 'at times overlap', he changes the meaning of Eco's categories into relatively vague definitions. Every medievalist film is to some degree a 'reflection of the contemporary', as well as 'philosophical approach' is an open description that does not exclude a philosophical approach which is a reflection of the contemporary .

Williams (1990: 10) reduced Eco's list to five categories 'based on the kind of world depicted, but also on the modern attitude it implies'. He offers (1) The Middle Ages that were 'bright, clean, noble, sporting and merry'. It are essentially the Middle Ages of Robin Hood and 'despite the outlaws, the politics are of the establishment'. (2) The Middle Ages as 'dark, dirty, violent, and politically unstable or threatening'. It is the medieval world of *The War Lord* (Schaffner 1965), *Conan the Barbarian* (Milius 1982) and Lang's *Nibelungen* (Lang 1924). (3) The Middle Ages as 'a place of freedom for action, whether in the darkness or light'. It are the Middle Ages as pretext, often set in Arthurian spin-off worlds such as *Prince Valiant* (Hathaway 1954). (4) The Middle Ages of national pride or identity such as in *Alexander Nevsky* (Eisenstein 1938), *Henry V* (Olivier 1944) or *The Nibelungen* (Lang 1924). (5) The Middle Ages as 'ironical visitation in which the site revisited is one or more of the mythical Middle Ages created by earlier movies or literature' as for example *Lancelot du Lac* (Bresson 1974). Also 'all kinds of parodies and updatings [sic] that "speculate about our infancy"' are included such as *Monthy Python and the Holy Grail* (Gilliam and Jones 1975), *The Court Jester* (Frank and Panama 1955) or *Robin and Marian* (Lester 1976).

Also Lindley (1998), only saw five different kinds of Middle Ages which were relevant for films. He offers: (1) The Middle Ages as an 'entry into childhood' where we see a naïve version of ourselves such as in *Excalibur* (Boorman 1980) or *The Fisher King* (Gilliam 1991). (2) The Middle Ages as a 'shorthand for the spirituality-missing-in-our-lives', a 'dreamtime' or an 'escape into nostalgia that seeks a golden age' such as in *The Navigator* (Ward 1988) or again *Excalibur* (Boorman 1980). (3) The Middle Ages as a 'Land of Lost Sexual Archetypes' for 'directors […] for whom gender difference remains fundamental and essential' such as in *First Knight* (Zucker 1995) or *Ladyhawke* (Donner 1985). (4) The Middle Ages as 'a game preserve […] for

unironized heroism' such as in *Star Wars* (Lucas 1977) or *Braveheart* (Gibson 1995). (5) The Middle Ages 'as visionary key […] a source of moral rigor and clarity' as can be seen in *Se7en* (Fincher 1995).

Also other authors such as Pugh and Ramey (2007: 5) discerned 'three primary tropes [which structured the] cinematic discourses': (1) the Middle Ages as lost ideal, (2) as a barbaric past, and (3) as the site of timeless romantic values'. Finke and Shichtman (2010: 15-22) also defined three little Middle Ages: (1) as 'synonymous with a peculiarly modern form of nostalgia for a past organic society that mourns the sterility of modernity' (e.g. *Star Wars*, *The Highlander* or *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*), (2) the Middle Ages as a time of 'barbarity, superstition, and violence from which civilization (modernity) is supposed to have rescued us' (e.g. the adverts made by Ogilvy and Mather for IBM Consulting), and (3) the Middle Ages as 'a break from a barbaric past, it also contains temporally the seeds of the modern, our third medievalism'.

Although the description of these traditions form good incentives, these are often not further elaborated. An example of where a specific tradition on representing the medieval world was more elaborated is Susan Aronstein's *Hollywood Knights: Arthurian cinema and the politcs of nostalgia* (2005). In her book she describes how the American cinema has appropriated the Arthurian world on the screen in which, through the stories of the rise and fall of the Round Table, became a generic tradition in which American society saw itself reflected on the screen. These films were read as constructions on how the ideal (American) society should be (or simply put the 'good American Values' against the 'bad Communist or Nazi-inspired values'). Through the depiction of the Arthurian world, these films offered an analysis of the possible threats to American society (be it the external threat of Mordred or the tension between the public and private duty of Lancelot and his love for Guinevere), as well as it offered models for the viewers on how to act in society as well.

> A generic tradition […] based on a politics of nostalgia that responds to the cultural crisis by first proposing an Americanized Camelot as a political ideal and then constructing American knights to sit at its Round Table. In their return to Camelot to provide a vision of national identity and a handbook for American subjectivity, these films participate in America's continual appropriation of the medieval past which, from the late nineteenth century on, has responded to attacks on traditional models of authority, masculinity, and national identity and legitimacy by retreating into an ideal past. (Aronstein, 2005: 1-2)

Aronstein argues that especially during times of national crises, such as the 'red-scare of the 1950's, the breakdown of authority in the 1960s and 1970s, the turn to the right in the 1980s, the crisis in masculine and national definition in the 1990s', there is a tradition in films that proposes an 'ideal medieval past as the solution to a troubled present' (Aronstein, 2005: 2). Ever since the link between the White House and Camelot was made explicit after the death of JFK, the Arthurian world in the

cinema has gained an extra layer of meaning where they allegorically could be read as a commentary on the national and especially the foreign policies (see for example De la Bretèque, 2004: 161; Finke and Shichtman, 2010: 156-180; Lagorio, 1989: 151-169; Kelly, 2007: 283).

1.4 Conclusion

There is no established single denominator to describe the kind of films that covers the relation between the Middle Ages and the cinema. The duality of the Middle Ages as a historical period and as a concept, as well as the different ways to approach these films is reflected in the plethora of different labels that are used to refer to it. Authors working from a historical perspective will use terms such as 'the reel' versus 'the real' Middle Ages (Harty, 1999) and describe their field of research as 'medieval history on film/movies' (Aberth, 2003; Halsal, s.d.) or simply as the 'Middle Ages in film' (Austin, 2000). Authors following the medievalist tradition use terms such as 'l'imaginaire médiéval' (De la Bretèque, 2004: 12, referring to Jacques Le Goff's *Imaginaire médiéval*, 1985) or the 'medieval imaginary' (Elliott, 2011: 12), 'medievalist films' or 'movie medievalism' (Finke and Shichtman, 2010: 6; Haydock, 2008: 1-2; Burt, 2007a: 219). More neutral terms are 'films à sujet médiéval' (Marty, 2001; Gorgievski, 2000) or the most common used term 'medieval film/movie' (Bildhauer, 2011; Bildhauer and Bernau, 2009; Lindley, 2007, 2001, 1998; Driver, 2004a, 2004b, 1999; Austin, 2002; Williams, 1999a, 1999b), although some authors regret the theoretical implication that this term could also signify films made *during* the Middle Ages (Sturtevant, 2010: 5-6; Pugh and Ramey, 2007: 1).

In this study we will follow the reasoning on medievalist films, as a way to emphasise the importance of the tradition in the construction of the medieval on screen. Analysing a medievalist film according to its faithfulness to the historical sources will not lead to a better understanding of these films. Following the medievalist tradition, the construct of the medieval derives its primary meaning out of the confrontation with modernity. The medieval functions as our 'significant Other' as constructing it offers enough freedom to allow a *customised* version of the past while still remaining recognisable and meaningful to a (Western) audience as a version of *their* history. Similar to the presentist perspective on historical films, medievalist films primarily addresses the contemporary society through the medieval. However, as De la Bretèque (2004: 12) wrote, the analysis does not stop there. The medieval in films is not interchangeable with other historical periods, but has been shaped, influenced and constructed according to different traditions which gives the medieval a unique position in Western cultural history. Arguably, medievalist films are not about the Middle Ages as a historical period, but they do say something about the medievalist tradition, which is not included in a strictly presentist perspective.

Consequently, medievalist films are primarily not the translation of the known historical sources to the screen, but are 'palimpsests of meaning' (De Wever, 2007:

10), consisting of medievalist codes, generic traditions and a broad range of filmic as well as broader cultural intertextuality. In line with Eco's (1987: 68) famous remark that before we speak of the Middle Ages we should 'first ask which Middle Ages one is dreaming of', the meaning of the Middle Ages is more often than not based upon cultural-historical traditions and codes rather than upon a meticulous reconstruction of a historical period. In addition, similar to the historical Middle Ages, the concept of the Middle Ages is no singular or monolithic construct with a fixed meaning. There are different traditions, that have been continued in films, as well as new medievalist traditions, such as the Hollywood Arthuriana in which the cinematic Arthurian world can be seen as a reflection on American politics. This knowledge of the medievalist tradition is therefore essential to come to a good understanding of medievalist films. For example, contrary to Aberth (2003: 11, 17, 21 & 22) who claimed that 'before one can unmask the modern Arthur, as portrayed on film, it is essential to come to know the medieval one', we argue that a good understanding of the 'Cinema Arthuriana' or more specifically the 'Hollywood Arthuriana' is more needed to analyse this kind of films. Where *King Arthur* (Fuqua 2004), for example, claimed to offer the truth behind the myth, the films does not necessarily meant the historical truth, but was debunking the more idealised myth of Arthur as propagated by a film as *First Knight* (Zucker 1995) (Aronstein, 2005: 191-214).[11]

[11] Even in the tradition of medievalism, the anachronism has not lost its status. Only in 2013 Pugh and Weisl in their *Medievalisms. Making the Past in the Present* looked at cinematic medievalism from the perspective of the anachronism in chapter 8: 'Movie Medievalisms: Five (or Six) Ways of Looking at an Anachronism' (pp. 83-100). See also Marshall (2007b: 2) who, despite basing himself on the medievalist tradition, referred to 'distorted' versions of the Middle Ages.

II The Dark Ages Imaginary

As the previous chapter demonstrated, analysing medievalist films is about much more than only the relation between the known historical facts, the time during which the films were made, and their audiovisual representation on the screen. More than a historical period, the medieval in films is primarily to be understood as a paradigm or a concept. As Eco (1987: 65) wrote, this concept of the medieval is 'the root of all our contemporary "hot" problems, and it is not surprising that we go back to that period every time we ask ourselves about our origin'. Following the medievalist tradition, the Middle Ages have been invented, and ever since constantly been *re*invented, to serve as a preferred projection screen for our more fundamental contemporary concerns. As there are different perspectives on how we, as moderns, can relate to these concerns, the medieval in the cinema is no monolithic entity or a genre on its own, but consists of many different kinds of 'little Middle Ages'. This study aims to focus on one of these little Middle Ages.

2.1 Aim of the Study

The aim of this study is to identify and describe a specific, coherent and recurring construct of the Middle Ages as the Dark Ages in feature films. We will analyse how these films construct a recognisable and understandable cinematic Dark Ages world, and how the stories that are told in this context can be meaningful to a modern audience. Following De La Bretèque (2004: 12-13), we call this the Dark Ages imaginary, or the sum of our beliefs about what constitutes the medieval as a dark age as expressed in feature films. This study is therefore no exercise in medieval studies, but in medievalism, as well as in the field of historical film studies and historical culture in its broader sense.

2.1.1 Why the Dark Ages?

We choose to focus on the Middle Ages as the Dark Ages for mainly two reasons. First, there is something of an intriguing paradox in wanting to return to an age we try to distance ourselves from. What would motivate filmmakers or attract audiences to stories set in a medieval world characterised by exploitation, ignorance and barbarity?

Second, there is a certain tendency in the scholarly literature on cinematic medievalism to overlook this construct of the medieval.[12] Where the pejorative meaning of the 'medieval' may be the most popular in general (Bull, 2005: 10-15; Van Uytven, 1998: 7; Andrea, 1992: 183; Blockmans, 1988: 3; Robinson, 1984: 751-756), this is not the case in the cinema that prefers gallant knights, courtly love and spectacular battles. This romanticised construct of the medieval often serves as a synonym for cinematic medievalism in general, thereby implicitly ignoring the darker renderings of the medieval. For example, when Williams (1999a: 9) claimed to 'consider the whole range of the cinema's Middle Ages' he characterised these films – in general – as films that are specialising in 'myth, spectacle and adventure in settings of psychological potency' (see also Driver, 2002: 6). Higson (2009: 203) characterised the medieval in the cinema – again in general – as 'more populist' and having a 'masculine appeal' compared with the 'numerous middle-brow costume dramas set in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries'. Driver and Ray (2004b: 5 & 9) described cinematic medievalism as a 'site for heroic fantasy, producing a wide range of heroic character types who quest and battle for various causes' and emphasised an inherent 'conservative ideology on the present' through their depictions of ideal masculinity where 'whiteness, heterosexuality, youth, strength, and entitlement rule'. Kelly and Pugh (2009b: 3 & 4-5) considered medievalist films as 'a place and time of an intransigent and romanticised vision of heterosexuality' where the 'master narrative of courtly love', 'the knight in shining armor' and 'the damsel in distress' were the distinguishing features of this medievalist world. Finally, Kelly (2004: 10) argued that the medieval intrinsically has a 'great potential in escapism, romance, heroism and spectacular images' with elements of 'heroism, gender relationships, loyalty, kinship, religion […] often attributed to the Arthurian setting'. In other words, the medieval in the cinema is mostly linked to a romanticised construct of the Middle Ages and the Dark Ages are easily overlooked. In fact, Aronstein (2005: 12), focusing on American medievalism, even claimed that there is virtually no such thing as the Dark Ages in popular culture: 'The view of the Middle Ages as a discarded and barbaric past, however, is, from the nineteenth century on, seldom evident in the medievalism of popular culture'.

This attention for the more romanticised elements of the medieval is reflected in the choice of films on which these abovementioned authors mainly focussed. In fact, as Bildhauer justly noted, if the same films are being chosen, the same kind of analysis will follow:

[12] This is not only the case for films. Ortenberg (2006: ix, italics mine), in her book on medievalism in general, made the analogy of medievalism and the search for the Holy Grail: 'This book is concerned with the dream of rewriting, reinterpreting, reconstructing, reshaping, indeed finding again, *the golden age of the medieval period* – as people seem to have done constantly since the sixteenth century'. In her chapter on cinematic medievalism Ortenberg (2006: 193-223) referred to it as 'Camelot Goes Celluloid', referring to the chivalric Arthurian world.

> One reason why most academic publications to date have tended to see medieval films as rather stereotypical, composed of the same few semantic elements, is that they have focussed on a certain kind of film, set in the courtly religious world we readily associate with the Middle Ages, such as *First Knight* (1995), *The Messenger: The Story of Joan of Arc* (1999), *A Knight's Tale* (2001), *Kingdom of Heaven* (2005) or *King Arthur* (2004). (Bildhauer, 2011: 15)

To this we may add for example *The Adventures of Robin Hood* (Curtiz 1938), *El Cid* (Mann 1961), *Excalibur* (Boorman 1980), *Braveheart* (Gibson 1995), or more recently the enormous success of the *Lord of the Rings Trilogy* (Jackson 2001, 2002, 2003) as well as the HBO miniseries *Game of Thrones* (HBO 2011 -) which all, in one way or another, attest of a more romanticised concept of the medieval.

2.1.2 The Dark Ages as a subgenre?

This study does not aim at establishing the Dark Ages as a new (sub)genre. Traditionally genre is understood as a system of conventions on which films are based such as recurring archetypes, visual imagery, plot and narrative development, characters, settings, props, music and so on which enables the industry to standardise production as well as facilitate product differentiation. It also affects the marketing as it helps to cater the film to the right audience segment. Additionally a genre label creates expectations and guidelines as to how the audience and the critics can approach or understand the film. In practice genre is best to be understood as a process, where the genre has its core characteristics but the implementation can vary, as most films make use of different genres at the same time. Furthermore, genres as such are also always evolving and changing (Gledhill, 2007: 252-259; Higson, 2003: 10; Altman, 2002; Neale, 1990: 45-66).

The historical film, perhaps with the exception of the costume drama or the heritage film, is usually not accepted as an independent genre. However, some scholars (e.g. Toplin, 2002: 8-57; Grindon, 1994: 8; Landy, 1991: 10) do claim that the historical film can be seen as a genre which implies that there are characteristics, patterns, themes or a specific iconography that shapes audience expectations and distinguishes them from other films. However, most genre characteristics as described by these authors remain restricted to the way historical data is remedialised into film (see the 'filmic sins', see supra 1.1.1a). It does not address the wide variety in iconography nor the different narrative structures that can be found in many of these historical films. There is little coherence in a genre that has to include *Schindler's List* (Spielberg 1993), *Reds* (Beatty 1981) as well as *La prise de pouvoir par Louis XIV* (Rossellini 1966). The characteristics of historical films are too rich and varied to describe them in one specific set of genre conventions. As

Rosenstone (2006b: 159-160) wrote 'even if historical film were given the status of a genre, what would be gained? Unlike other genres (the Western, the Musical, the Gangster Film), the historical film ultimately refers to a discourse outside the frame'.

The same question applies to films on the Middle Ages as well. Many authors use the term 'medieval genre', although they rarely clarify or define it (see e.g. Kelly and Pugh, 2009b: 8; Pugh and Ramey, 2007: 6; Driver and Ray, 2004a: 5; Lindley, 2001b: 96). It is not impossible that, despite being a quite heterogeneous entity, the sheer quantity of films on the Middle Ages opens up the possibility that throughout the years recurring elements or patterns may have emerged that shape the production, marketing as well as reception of these films. As Salih (2009: 35) wrote: 'Though the multiplicity of the cinematic medieval militates against it becoming a coherent genre, it is possible that medieval films might have indeed some specifically cinematic characteristics which distinguishes them from films set in other periods of the past' (see also Elliott, 2011: 182).

The most prominent amongst these scholars is Bildhauer (2011: 11-14), who attempted to create a medieval film genre, although she immediately admitted that these films are not as 'clear-cut as the Western, the musical and the horror film'. Nonetheless, she distinguished three core 'assumptions' which constitute the medieval as a genre: 'that they were allegedly less reliant on linear time, on writing and on individualism than modernity'. Without going into a more detailed discussion, which we reserve for later on, (at least the last two of) of these assumptions prove to be problematic when claiming them to be valid for 'the medieval film' as such. As is often the case when dealing with genre, the choice of corpus is essential. Where Bildhauer's claims may be valid for the films she selected to analyse, this is not necessarily the case for other films that deal with the Middle Ages. In a review on her book, Chapman (2012: 332; see also Sturtevant, 2010: 19) even commented that Bildhauer 'has decided upon her three motifs and then chosen those films that most easily fit into this predetermined thesis'.

While there are traditions and clusters of films which follow the same structure that guides public expectations, the medieval as such is cinematically a too diverse period to be one overarching genre. The 'Hollywood Arthuriana' (see supra, 1.3.2, pp. 49-50), for example, may be a coherent tradition, yet as Aronstein (2005: 3) wrote, it still is 'a hybrid genre forged from a variety of traditions: Western, swashbuckler, epic'. Contrary to the cinematic construction of Antiquity where the epic is the preferred genre (Chapman, 2012: 330), but certainly not the only one, the Middle Ages in the cinema can range from the epic to art house, comedy, musical or horror. Again, there is little to be gained by placing *La Passion de Jeanne d'Arc* (Dreyer 1928) in the same category as *The Lion in winter* (Harvey 1968) or *Excalibur* (Boorman 1980).

According to Higson, genre is more important than the historical period during which the film is set:

> Regardless of the period in which they are set, the iconography, the sensibility and the pleasures on offer in these films are similar. The medieval in this sense is simply a vehicle for another version of the historical epic, the historical adventure as blockbuster, pitched somewhere between *Alexander* (2004), *Troy* (2004) and *The Passion of the Christ* (2004) on the one hand, and *Pirates of the Caribbean* (2003), *The Gangs of New York* (2002) and *Pearl Harbor* (2001) on the other. Filmic representations are always caught between generic convention and historical specificity, and representations of the medieval are no exception. (Higson, 2009: 208-209)

Although a selection based on genre is a valuable way to study genre, we disagree that a cinematic medieval world can be made identical with Antiquity based on a shared genre. As representatives of the detective-genre it is possible to compare *The Name of the Rose* with *Silent Witness*, *Walking the Dead* or even *CSI* (see Taussat, 2001: 274), but this approach does not reveal anything about the construction of the broader medieval world of *The Name of the Rose*. Where genre, as traditionally defined, is an important factor that shapes films on the Middle Ages as such, we do not consider the medieval to be a genre. In order to analyse how the Dark Ages are constructed in the cinema, a genre approach will be too restricted as it gives too much emphasis on the filmic text and easily neglects all the possible sources and influences, mostly from the medievalist codes and traditions, that films include and draw inspiration and meaning from which we consider to be essential.

2.1.3 The Dark Ages Imaginary

In order to avoid confusion with the Anglo-Saxon use of the term 'the Dark Ages', the Dark Ages in this study do not refer to historical 'pre-conquest England' or England before the Norman invasion in 1066 (Robinson, 1984: 750-751). In the previous chapter we already mentioned several different incentives of how medievalist films construct the Middle Ages as a Dark Ages (see supra, 1.3.2). For example, Eco's (1987: 69) third 'little Middle Ages' was a '*barbaric age*, a land of elementary and outlaw feelings'. It referred to the Middle Ages of Franzetta's fantasies, early Bergman films as well as Wagner's *Ring*. Eco considered this to be 'shaggy medievalism, and the shaggier its heroes, the more profoundly ideological its superficial naïveté'. Kevin Harty (1999: 5) interpreted this category of the barbaric Middle Ages as existing in 'many forms'. It ranges from the rape-story in Bergman's *The Virgin Spring* (1959), Rowland V. Lee's *Tower of London* (1939), Verhoeven's *Flesh+Blood* (1985), Raimi's *Army of Darkness* (1992), Borowczyk's *Blanche* (1971) to Tavernier's *La Passion Béatrice* (1987). What connects these films according to Harty is that they are

'unflinching in the view of the brutality of the Middle Ages that they present'. Williams' (1990: 10) interpretation of this category was the Middle Ages as 'dark, dirty, violent and politically unstable or threatening such as in *The War Lord* (Schaffner 1965), *Conan the Barbarian* (Milius 1982) and *The Nibelungen* (Lang 1924)'. Lindley (1998) did not include a comparable category in his five little Middle Ages.[13]

These abovementioned categories, however, offer a wide variety of films and emphasise very different aspects of what can be seen as dark or barbaric. In this study we chose for a different conceptualisation of the Dark Ages. Preliminary research indicated that many medievalist films could be linked to medievalist traditions which already started in the fourteenth century onwards that constructed the Middle Ages as a primitive and underdeveloped age compared with contemporary society (e.g. Raedts, 2011; Sturtevant, 2010: 121-156; Bull, 2005: 15; McArthur, 1998: 172; Amalvi, 1996: 221-230; Pernoud, 1977: 15; Kurth, 18--). The link between this tradition and medievalist films became the starting point for the research. In a next phase, films were selected that construct the Dark Ages as a time of *feudal oppression*, *intellectual darkness* and as a *primitive, violent and disease-ridden world*. At the beginning of each section we will offer a short sketch of the historical tradition of medievalism related to the topic.

We do not claim to study '*the* medieval' in film (e.g. Bildhauer, 2011, italics mine), nor emphasise the *presentist* elements (e.g. Kelly and Pugh, eds., 2009; Ramey and Pugh, eds., 2007), nor focus on specific elements of the medieval (e.g. the hero in Driver and Ray, eds., 2004a), nor privilege the historical side (Aberth, 2003), nor will we depart from a theoretical perspective (Haydock, 2008; Burt, 2008). Based upon this corpus, the main research question for this study will be to identify and describe the elements of the Dark Ages imaginary, where they come from and analyse how they relate to the society in which these films were produced (De la Bretèque, 2004: 12-13).

[13] Part II of Ramey and Pugh's (2007, eds). *Race, Class and Gender, in "medieval" Cinema* that focussed on "Barbarism and the Medieval Other", consisted out of essays on 'Vikings through the Eyes of an Arab Ethnographer: Constructions of the Other in *The 13th Warrior'* by Lynn Shutters; 'Mission Historical, or '[T]here were a hell of a lot of knights': Ethnicity and Alterity in Jerry Bruckheimer's *King Arthur*' by Caroline Jewers and 'Inner-City Chivalry in Gil Junger's *Black Knight*: A South Central Yankee in King Leo's Court' by Laurie Finke and Martin Shichtman.

Finke and Shichtman (2010: 15-22) in their *Cinematic Illuminations* offered no film-related example on the Middle Ages as an age of 'barbarity, superstition, and violence from which civilization (modernity) is supposed to have rescued us'.

RQ: What is the Dark Ages imaginary?

What is the sum of our beliefs about what constitutes the medieval as a dark age as expressed in feature films? This comprises two sub questions:

1. How is the Dark Ages imaginary constructed?

(a) What kind of stories are told in the context of the Dark Ages? What are they about, what is the central conflict of the plot and how is it resolved?
(b) What elements (see 'iconogrammes' or 'passages obligées') signify a Dark Ages world that are at once recognisable and understandable to a modern audience?
(c) Following the medievalist tradition, how do these elements relate with the historical tradition?

2. How does the Dark Ages imaginary relate to contemporary society?

Following the medievalist tradition that constructs the medieval as a distant mirror, how does a film on the Dark Ages relate to the society in which it was made? In other words, why do we, as moderns, return to an age we try to distance ourselves from?

2.2 The Corpus

First, in this section the different ways in which films can relate to the medieval will be discussed. Next, we will describe the criteria on which the films that will form the basis for this study will be selected. Third, the corpus on which this study is based will be presented.

2.2.1 Medievalist films

More than only focusing on how filmic history differs from written history, or studying how a film relates to the society in which it was made, we consider it essential to include the medievalist tradition on which these films rely to construct a meaningful version of the medieval for a contemporary audience. Therefore, we prefer to label these films as 'medievalist films', which Burt (2007a: 219) defined 'as broadly as possible to include films set in the Middle Ages as well as films with contemporary setting that allude to the Middle Ages or are anchored in them' (see also Haydock, 2008: 1-2; Finke and Shichtman, 2010: 6).

First, this definition overcomes the problems of a traditional demarcation that considers films as 'medieval' when they depict events as if they occurred during the 'historical' Middle Ages, traditionally defined as the period between ca. 500 AD to ca. 1500 AD. For example, Kevin Harty in his filmography *The Reel Middle Ages* (1999: 1) selected films 'that recount events as early as St. Patrick's conversion of Ireland to Christianity, a process generally thought to have begun before 432, and films that recount events as late as John of Austria's defeat of the Turkish forces at the Battle of Lepanto in 1571'. Similarly, Blanton-Whetsell and Avrich (2000: 4), when compiling a 'bibliography of film, specifically focused on the images of medieval women' defined the medieval as 'the time period between 400 and 1500 CE, primarily in western Europe'. And also Williams (1999b: 20) included in his filmography that 'as for what is medieval, I have included everything from approximately the Vikings to the day before Columbus sailed, but have not been strict'. However, despite the ostensible simplicity of these statements, it is not evident to define exactly what is meant with a film that is set in the Middle Ages. For example, is *Le Retour de Martin Guerre* (Vigne 1982) related to the Middle Ages (e.g. Harty, 1999: 223) or is this film, because it takes place after the Reformation, more related to the Early-Modern period (O'Brien, 2011; Voeltz, 2010: 26; De la Bretèque, 2004: 22)? On a related issue, De la Bretèque also criticised Harty for being inconsistent because he included versions of Goethe's

Faust (Harty, 1999: 88-93) but ignored filmic versions of Don Quixote (De la Bretèque, 2004: 22).

Another issue of defining the relation between films and the Middle Ages based on a historical demarcation is that it cannot account for the many films which are not set in some historically identifiable Middle Ages, yet are unmistakably 'medieval'. Levy and Coote (2004: 100), for example, wrote on Bresson's *Lancelot du Lac* (1974) that though it is 'nominally' a medieval film, in fact it lies 'quite outside any recognizably historical timeline: it has been extracted, and abstracted'. In an interview, Bresson even said that his film had 'ni temps, ni lieu' (quoted in De la Bretèque, 2004: 81). Similarly, it makes little sense trying to pinpoint the 'Dark Ages' of *Excalibur* (Boorman 1980), when 'The Land Was Divided And Without A King', onto a historical timeline. The same holds true for trying to identify what specific 'wars' *First Knight* (Zucker 1995) is referring to in its opening titles (cf. 'At long last, the wars were over') and when and where the film exactly takes place.

In order to overcome this problem some authors have tried to make an extra distinction between films based upon *medieval history* and *medieval fiction* (De la Bretèque, 2004: 10 & 188-189; see also Paden, 2004: 79). However, the question remains whether this distinction is a fruitful way to categorise films on the Middle Ages. De la Bretèque acknowledged that historical films are *a priori* a blend of fact and fiction, but recent films like *Robin Hood* (Scott 2010), *Pope Joan* (Wortmann 2009), *Beowulf & Grendel* (Gunnarsson 2005) or *King Arthur* (Fuqua 2004) really challenge this distinction by pulling a fictional character based upon medieval legends into a world that is clearly intended to be convincingly historical. The question, however, is whether or not films based upon medieval history are fundamentally different than films based upon medieval fiction. As the abovementioned examples suggest, this is not necessarily the case. To solve this issue there are authors who no longer focus on the filmic text but reverse the perspective or in the words of Sturtevant (2010: 48): 'medieval film is best defined in the eye of its beholders'. In other words, when a film is recognised as 'medieval', it is a medieval film. Also Bildhauer (2011: 8, italics mine) included this perspective in her broad definition of medieval films as 'films that are set between the years 500 and 1500 AD, *and/or perceived to be medieval by their makers and recipients* […]'. This solves the issue on the distinction between films based on medieval history and films based on medieval fiction, but raises another difficulty: what do we consider to be 'medieval'? This often leads to theoretical selections which may be contested. For example, based upon her three genre-characteristics Bildhauer selected a film like *Sign of the Pagan* (Sirk 1954), which is still set in Antiquity, as well as *The Golem* (Wegener 1915) set in a pre-modern but indistinct past. In this study we will approach this issue by defining an imaginary based upon films of which the plot explicitly is set during the Middle

Ages in order to obtain the core characteristics of what is related to the medieval imaginary.

Second, this definition also opens the door to more inclusive ways of analysing the medieval in films. For example, films on time travelling, that directly juxtapose the medieval with a contemporary setting can be included as well (Elliott, 2011: 197-198; De la Bretèque, 2004: 58-62). Also films set in a contemporary setting, but referring to the Middle Ages can offer a construct of medievalism, as Lindley (1998) for example linked *Se7en* (Fincher 1995) to a construct of the medieval as 'a visionary key' and 'a source of moral rigor and clarity'. And finally films that are indebted to medieval historical models, or can be meaningfully linked to a medievalist tradition, can be included as well (see De la Bretèque, 2004: 63-70). For example, *L'Eternel Retour* (Delannoy 1943) can be seen as the story of Tristan and Isolde, but transposed to another age. Other films, such as *Knightriders* (Romero 1981) or *The Fisher King* (Gilliam 1991) are strongly related to the Arthur myth. The *Indiana Jones*-trilogy (Spielberg 1981, 1984, 1989) has been read as a 'tale of knighthood' or a modernised version of 'medieval chivalric romances' (Aronstein, 1995: 3-5). *Gone with the Wind* (Fleming 1939) has demonstrably strong roots in Celtic mythology (Welsh, 1998: 307) and also *Star Wars* has been read as a medieval chivalric romance (e.g. Ganim, 2009: 184; Lagorio, 1989: 158; Rubey, 1978; Collins, 1977).[14]

2.2.2 Selecting a corpus

In order to give the concept of the Dark Ages imaginary enough scope, a relatively extended corpus is required (see De la Bretèque, 2004: 15). Although many edited volumes have been published on medievalist films, these collections of what essentially are case-studies (of course without criticising the individual quality of these essays), do not easily lead to an integrated and coherent study of medievalist films (see for example Bildhauer, 2012: 139).[15] Only recently, Woods (2014: 1) wrote

[14] Additionally, these categories are not mutually exclusive as the same film can belong to different categories at the same time. *The Da Vinci Code* (Howard 2006), for example, not only shows events that took place during the Middle Ages (events from the crusades), makes many references to the Middle Ages while the plot is situated in the present, but the story as a whole can also be read as modern version of the Grail Quest (as Langdon says to Teabing 'only the worthy will find the grail').

[15] See for example *Le Moyen Âge vu par le cinéma Européen* (Kawa-Topor, ed., 2001a); *The Medieval Hero on Screen. Representations from Beowulf to Buffy* (Driver and Ray, eds., 2004); *Race, Class, and Gender in 'Medieval Cinema'* (Ramey and Pugh, eds., 2007*); Hollywood in the Holy Land. Essays on Film Depictions of the Crusades and Christian-Muslim Clashes* (Haydock and Risden, eds., 2009); *Queer Movie Medievalism* (Kelly and Pugh, eds., 2009); *Medieval film* (Bernau and Bildhauer, eds., 2009) or *Neomedievalism in the Media* (Robinson and Clements, eds., 2012).

that ‘at present, there are few books that try to define the subgenre of medieval film by describing its features and analysing its effects and their significance. This book is a modest, informal attempt at such a definition’. Although not looking at it as a ‘subgenre’, this study aims to do the same. However, in order to ensure the feasibility of this research, the corpus will have to remain relatively restricted as well. Contrary to De la Bretèque (2004: 16), who studied over 280 films between 1975 and 2004, this is not quite possible in the context of this study.

First, this research focuses on feature films which means that no documentaries will be selected. Additionally, no distinction will be made in style or genre of the film, which means that everything ranging from art-house to horror can be selected. We argue that while the specific rendering of the construct of the medieval may greatly vary, beneath the surface the construction of the medieval world and the values they refer to can be similar.

Second, as the construct of the Dark Ages or the Middle Ages as a whole is essentially a Western concept, we will exclusively focus on films made in the Western world (see De la Bretèque, 2004: 11 & 21). Other imaginaries, as for example premodern Japan (e.g. Schiff, 2007: 59-72) or China (e.g. Lorge, 2007: 155-168) are most often studied from a Western perspective. Edward Risden (2009: 292; see also Finke and Shichtman, 2007: 107), writing on the filmic representation of the Crusades, lamented the lack of Arab perspectives on films related to the Crusades. However, this study will offer a Western perspective on a Western concept.

Third, only films which are set *during* the medieval, will be selected. In the epilogue of this study we will further elaborate on this issue. This also helps to avoid discussion as to what degree films as *Le Retour de Martin Guerre* or *Sign of the Pagan* can be seen as ‘fully medieval’. Additionally, the Dark Ages are not used as a historical reference. Even when films claim to be set in the Dark Ages, this does not necessarily mean that they are set in the Dark Ages as defined here. For example, the Dark Ages during which *Tristan + Isolde* (Reynolds 2006) claims to take place in (cf. ‘Britain. The Dark Ages. The Roman Empire has fallen. The land lies in ruins, divided among feuding tribes […].’) is linked to the Anglo-Saxon definition of the term and consequently referring to the first part of the Middle Ages as a historical period. The construction of the medieval in *Tristan + Isolde* serves as the ideal backdrop of chivalry and perfect love of a knight for the King’s wife, similar to the Arthurian legends. Similarly, the Dark Ages in which *Excalibur* (Boorman 1980) takes place (cf. ‘The Dark Ages. The Land was Divided and Without A King’) are not the Dark Ages on which this study focuses as this film is a quintessential example of a romanticised chivalric world.

Fourth, although De la Bretèque (2004: 14) wrote that the imaginary is a form of collective representation, the box-office success will not be taken into consideration here (see Sturtevant, 2010: 49; Wright, 1975: 13). As Kracauer (1947:

7; see also Higson, 2009: 206; King, 1977: 110) already wrote, it usually remains unclear what specific aspect of the film it was that made the film into a commercial success (ranging from the marketing of the film to specific elements of the plot or ideology in general). Additionally, in a contemporary context, there is no real monitoring of DVD-sale, rental, video-on-demand or especially piracy or other illegal ways of *sharing* films. Additionally, even in case of a total box-office disaster, it remains interesting to analyse what a filmmaker thought would be relevant for contemporary society.

Fifth and most important, we consider the films selected for the corpus to be representative of the Dark Ages imaginary. We do not claim to offer an exhaustive overview on all what could be added to this imaginary. There are undoubtedly many other films that can be related to this imaginary and would add to the construct. This means that there will be some level of confirmation bias, but we do not consider this to be problematic as we argue that the corpus enables us to offer a valid construct of the core concepts of the medieval as a dark age (the feudal Dark Ages, the intellectual Dark Ages and the Dark Ages as a time of barbarity, filth and disease).

2.2.3 Corpus

For films made between 1897 and 1996, we could rely on the extensive filmography *The Reel Middle Ages. American, Western and Eastern European, Middle Eastern and Asian Films About Medieval Europe* compiled by Kevin Harty (1999). All 564 entries were read and those which seemed related to the description of the Dark Ages were further investigated.[16] Additionally, we relied on references to films found in the literature, reviews or the search-function or key-words on imdb.com. Next, we will present the eleven films of the corpus. We argue that despite the relatively restricted corpus the films are representative and sufficient to demonstrate a coherent medievalist tradition on representing the Dark Ages.

Remarkably, the majority of the films of the corpus dates from 1972 onwards. Before 1972, only two Scandinavian films (*Häxan* and *The Seventh Seal*) that constructed the Middle Ages as the Dark Ages are included in this corpus. Especially

[16] Harty's (1999: 76 & 94) filmography also mentioned two examples of films which could have been selected, but were not found and therefore not included in the corpus. *Le Droit de Seigneur* (Pathè Frères 1908), for example, focuses on the revolt of the serfs against their cruel lord. However, he is saved by his wife, to who the serfs listen as she was always good to them. In the end, the lord promises them to better his life. In *Feudal Rights* (no director known, Cines 1910), made in Italy, a cruel duke has set his mind of the daughter of one of his serfs. In disguise, he manages to abduct the girl, but in revenge, the father and the lover of the girl force their way into the castle and burn it down (Harty, 1999: 94).

after *The Name of the Rose* (1986), this kind of films appears more frequently (see infra, pp. 280-281)

Häxan (Christensen 1922) is a Swedish production (Svensk Filmindustri), written and directed by Danish director Benjamin Christensen. When Christensen received a copy of the *Malleus Malleficarum* (the *Witches' Hammer*) in Germany in 1914, he became fascinated with the history of witchcraft and decided to make a film about it (Sharpe, 2011: 84). Despite the fact that the film was no success, this film drew the attention of Louis B. Mayer at MGM which resulted in attracting Christensen to Hollywood (Lunde, 2010: 9; Petrie, 1985: 157 & 159; Baxter, 1976: 62). In 1941 this film was re-released by Christensen himself, and was again re-made in 1968 into a shorter version (77' instead of the original 91') by director Antony Balch with a different score by Daniel Humair and a narrator William S. Burrough under the title of *Häxan. Witchcraft through the Ages* (Walker, 2007: 50-53).

The film presents itself as 'a presentation from a cultural and historical point of view in 7 chapters of moving pictures'. It shows a historical re-enactment of a medieval witch trial from the stage of the accusation to the verdict by the inquisitors. This film is strictly speaking an exception to the rule as the film also includes a documentary-chapter as well as a chapter set in contemporary society (Harty, 1999: 119). However, following De La Bretèque (2004: 656), who wrote that this film was 'la grande reference du cinéma sur la sorcellerie' for decades, the film has been selected for its representation of medieval witchcraft.[17]

The Seventh Seal (Bergman 1957) is Swedish Production (Svensk Filmindustri), written and directed by Ingmar Bergman. The film was an adaptation of the theatrical one-act play *Wood Painting* written by Bergman. According to Haydock (2008: 40) this film had 'perhaps the greatest influence on subsequent movie medievalism over the last fifty years' (see Woods, 2014: 80-81; Marty, 2001: 153; Harty, 1999: 245-247; Paden, 1998: 294-299; Gado, 1986: 196-198; Donner, 1975: 150-151; Stubbs, 1975: 66).

Two knights returning from the Crusades, arrive in their plague-stricken homeland. One of the knights, Antonius Block, has lost his faith during the Crusades and meets Death at the beach. By challenging Death to a game of chess, Block stalls Death, which enables him to fulfil one last meaningful act on earth. This film will be mainly discussed for its representation of witchcraft and the plague.

[17] Dreyer admired the film which influenced *La Passion de Jeanne d'Arc* (Petrie, 1985: 158). Kendrick (2003) even suggests that there is no coincidence between the re-release of *Häxan* in 1941 and Dreyer's *Vredens Dag* (*Day of Wrath*) that appeared two years later.

The Pied Piper (Demy 1972) is a British (Goodtimes enterprises) and American (Sagittarius Productions Inc.) production. The film, directed by Jacques Demy, was based on the children's poem *The Pied Piper of Hamelin: A Child's story* (1842) by Robert Browning, and was adapted for the screen by Jacques Demy, Andrew Birkin and Mark Peploe (Pollock, 1999: 141; Harty, 1999: 212; Queenan, 1978: 104-105; Dickson, 1926).

The Pied Piper retells the story of the Pied Piper of Hamelin, but contrary to the children's poem, the film added a fictionalised feudal context (represented by the Baron, his son, the Bishop and the papal nuncio) and added the Black Death to the story. This film will be mainly discussed for its representation of a feudal society as well as its representation of the plague.

The Name of the Rose (Annaud 1986) is a German (Neue Constantin Film), Italian (Cristaldi film) and French (Les Films Ariane) production, based upon the immense success of Umberto Eco's novel of the same name (1984), this film by Jean-Jacques Annaud claimed to be a filmic palimpsest (Woods, 2014: 117; Strong, 2011; Taussat, 2001: 261-262). Where it is said that the book revived the interest for the Middle Ages in general, the film can be said to have done the same for films on the Middle Ages (Woods, 2014: 116; Amalvi, 1996: 13; Janssens, 1990: 124-125).

The story of the film is about several mysterious murders set in an abbey in Northern Italy in 1327. This canonical medievalist film focussed according to Harty (1999: 366) on the 'darker elements of the so-called Dark Ages'. We will discuss this film mainly for its representation of clerical feudalism, as well the intellectual Dark Ages characterised by dogmatism.

Le moine et la sorcière (Schiffman 1987) is a French production (o.a. Bleu Productions, Lara Classics inc and Séléna Audiovisual) with additional funding by the American National Endowment for the Humanities. The first screenplay of the film was written by Pamela Berger, a professor of art at Boston College, and was inspired on a story written by the thirteenth century French inquisitor Etienne de Bourbon (1180-1261). Berger asked Suzanne Schiffman, a former assistant of Truffaut, Rivette and Demy, to rewrite the screenplay, but during the process Schiffman chose to direct the film herself (Berger, 1995: 93-94; Peary, 1989/89: 46-47; Jackson, 1988: 45; Jhirad, 1988: 44; Chevrie, 1987).

This films tells the story of how Etienne de Bourbon, a wandering thirteenth-century inquisitor, stumbles upon potential heretic practices in a little village in the Dombes area. He discovers that a greyhound is being revered as a saint as well as a hidden cult in which babies are offered to the Spirit in the Woods. This results in accusing the woman involved in these rituals of witchcraft and heresy. The film also added a fictionalised storyline to the original story by De Bourbon that deals with

how the peasants were oppressed by the count de Villars. We will discuss this film in both the chapter on feudalism as well as in the chapter on dogmatism (especially related to witchcraft).

La Passion Béatrice (Tavernier 1987) is a French (AMLF, Cléa Productions, Les Films de la Tour, Little Bear, TF1 Films Production) and Italian (Scena Film) production. The screenplay was written by Colo Tavernier O'Hagan, Bertrand Tavernier's wife. *La Passion Béatrice* (1987) proved to be Tavernier's first real box office flop and is not considered to be one of his important films (Hay, 2000: 121-122; Harty, 1999: 390; Rabinovici, 1987: 5).

The story of *La Passion Béatrice* is based on the famous Cenci story. On September 9th 1598 count Francesco Cenci, 52 years old, was found murdered in his castle in La Petrella de Salto. Francesco Cenci was an infamous man who was frequently accused of corruption and violence, and who held his second wife Lucrezia and his daughter Béatrice imprisoned in his castle. It is claimed that he sexually abused them both. Almost immediately after Francesco's death, his family was accused, tortured and found guilty of the murder. They were sentenced to death and executed in Rome on September 10th 1599, except Bernardo Cenci who was too young to be actively involved in the murder. Still, he was forced to watch the execution of his family (for a comprehensive history on the Cenci case, see Ricci, 1926). This story became very popular amongst writers, painters and poets. Contrary to the tradition on the Cenci case, however, Tavernier placed the story in the Middle Ages and turned the Cenci into De Cortemare. We argue that *La Passion Béatrice* is primarily not about the murder on a notorious father by his closest family, but essentially a study on the corrupting effects of unbridled and unchecked power on the soul of man, for which the medieval period proved to be the perfect backdrop. We will discuss this film in the chapter on feudalism.

The Advocate (Megahey 1993) is a French (Ciby 200) and British (BBC, British Screen Finance Ltd.) production with additional funding by the European Co-production Fund. The film was written and directed by Lesley Megahey. It was his first and so far his last feature film (Harty, 1999: 120-121; Strick, 1994: 53; Ebert, 1994; Maslin, 1994). The film was originally called *The Hour of the Pig* was re-cut and renamed into *The Advocate* for the American market.[18] The film was inspired by Evans' (1906) *The Criminal Prosecution and Capital Punishment of Animals. The Lost History of Europe's Animal Trials*.

[18] The version that is used for this study is the American version, which is why we refer to this film by his American title. The main difference between the two versions, however, is a sex scene which has been cut in order to get a better rating for the American market (see Woods, 2002: 56, 2014: 59).

In the film, the Parisian lawyer Richard Courtois, accompanied by his clerk Mathieu, is trying to leave the politicking and corrupting of the city behind and hopes to find peace of mind in the countryside village of Abbeville. His naïve and idealised conception of the countryside, however, is quickly shattered. Instead of finding his idealised rural society, he enters a world of intrigues, feudal usurpation, anti-Semitism, witchcraft, animal trials, discrimination, intolerance and superstition. We will discuss this film in the chapter on feudalism.

Anazapta (Sciamma 2002) is British production (Beyond Films, Enterprise Films, Great British Films, Spice Factory), written and directed by Spanish director Alberto Sciamma and co-written by Harriet Sand (Sciamma, s.d.). *Anazapta* can be seen as an exponent of the New Horror Cinema, a revival of the horror-genre at the beginning of the twenty-first century which was most visible in the UK (Walker, 2012; Simpson, 2012: 82-84).

The film is set in the context of the Hundred Year's War as well as the Black Death. When a band of soldiers returns from the war, they have brought a prisoner of war with them. Soon it appears that his arrival is linked to a horrendous crime which happened the year before. Joan Basset, the wife of the lord, had committed adultery and as a punishment the lord offered a shilling to everyone who raped his 'whore of a wife'. The film suggests that the prisoner of war is in fact her son, coming to avenge his mother. We will discuss this film in the chapter on the extreme Dark Ages, especially related to the representation of the plague.

The Reckoning (McGuigan 2002) is a British (Renaissance Films) and Spanish (Kanzaman, M.D.A Films S.L.) production. The film was directed by Paul McGuigan, based on the novel *Morality Play* (1995) by novelist Barry Unsworth, and was adapted to the screen by Mark Mills. The film seems to stand out in the work of McGuigan, who previously directed *The Acid House* (1998) and *Gangster no. 1* (2000). Although it is his only historical film, Roger Ebert (2004) commented that all these films show the 'same taste for dissecting the evil beneath the skin'.

After Nicholas, the village priest, committed adultery he has to run for his life. He joins a group of travelling artists in whose company he arrives in a village where a woman is accused of murdering a young boy. It is clear, however, that the real culprit is the local lord De Guise. Through detective work and the performance of a new play directly based on the crimes committed in the village, the artists succeed in obtaining both the truth and justice. This film will be discussed in the chapter on feudalism as well as the chapter on dogmatism.

Pope Joan (Wortmann 2008), is a German (Constantin Film, ARD Degeto Film, MSM Studios and UFA International Film & TV Production GmbH), British (Dune Films),

Italian (Medusa Film) and Spanish (Ikiru Films) production. The film was directed by Sonke Wortmann, and was based on the novel of American writer Donna Woodfolk Cross, adapted for the screen by Heinrich Hadding and Sönke Wortmann.[19]

This film is based on the old and enduring legend that during the eighth century there was a short reign of a female pope called Johanna (DeMarco, 2008: 63; Tinsley, 1987: 381).[20] The film tells the story from Johanna's birth in Ingelheim to how she rose to become Pope, and the difficulties she met underway. This film will be discussed in the chapter on feudalism and dogmatism.

Black Death (Smith 2010) is a German (Egoli Tossel Film and The Post Republic) and British (Hanway Films, Zephyr Films and Ecosse Films) production. The film was directed by Christopher Smith and written by Dario Poloni. Similar to *Anazapta*, *Black Death* can be placed in the context of the New Horror cinema. The director, Christopher Smith, is an exponent of the British Horror cinema with films such as *Creep* (2004), *Severance* (2006) and *Triangle* (2009) (Walker, 2012: 441 & 446).

In 1348, during the outbreak of the Black Death in England, a band of soldiers has been sent out by the bishop to hunt down and kill a necromancer. Rumour has it that a certain remote village, although they have renounced God and are led by a necromancer, is 'beyond death's icy grasp' thereby succeeding where God and the catholic Church fail miserably. Fearing that the people, inspired by this example, may 'look beyond God or the Church for answers', the bishop orders a group of soldiers to find that particular village. But where they officially are only sent out to 'investigate', the soldiers' true aim is to eliminate that threat. This film will mainly be discussed for its representation of witchcraft and the plague.

[19] In *Pope Joan* (1972), the story of Pope Joan was turned into film by Michael Anderson. Originally made as a time-travelling film, reminiscent of *A Connecticut Yankee*, this film is relatively far removed from constructing the Middle Ages as a Dark Age.

[20] The legend was already mentioned in Etienne de Bourbon's *De Diversis Materiis Praedicabilibus* (1261) in which the story on the holy greyhound can also be found (DiMarco, 2008: 63). To this day this legend continually recurs as for example in the context of the election of the new pope (Shubert A. and Wedeman, B. (2013). 'Legend of female pope endures as men decide church's next leader'. *CNN.com*, March 13th 2013. edition.cnn.com/2013/03/13/world/women-pope/index.html?hpt=hp_c1. Consulted on March 13th 2013.

2.3 Methodology

> I am trained as a historian of the modern world, and my investigations have convinced me that we can't get very far with this subject unless we focus on movies set in a period which we have seriously studied, researched, and taught.
>
> R. Rosenstone, *The Reel Joan of Arc*, 2003, p. 62.

Despite Rosenstone's claim on how historical films should be analysed (see supra, 1.1.2, pp. 20-21), we argue that in case of medievalist films, the historical knowledge of the Middle Ages will not be the cornerstone of the analysis. Medievalist films are not to be analysed according to their relation to the known historical sources, but only by understanding medievalist codes, cultural traditions and (filmic) intertextuality.

This study is essentially a qualitative interpretative study that focuses primarily on the filmic text and its place in the medievalist tradition. Following Eco (1990: 166-180), the aim is not to reconstruct the intention of the author, nor the intention of the reader or the interpreter, but the *intention of the text*. Theoretically it aims at reconstructing a model reader of the text, as an empirical reader. Consequently, we refrain from psychoanalytical reasoning as we will not theorise on the link between the films and the audience's general subconscious (on medieval films and psychoanalysis, see e.g. Finke and Shichtman, 2010: 7-10; Haydock, 2008: 2 & 5; Burt, 2008; Woods, 2004: 45; Eco, 1987: 65; Zink, 1985). This textual approach does not open the door to unbridled subjectivism as interpretation is not infinite. It is bound to a limited object, in this case a corpus of films. Every interpretation has to be based on elements of the corpus as well as all the external elements brought to this corpus have to be accounted for based upon three conditions: 'That it cannot be explained more economically; that it points to a single cause (or a limited class of possible causes) and not to an indeterminate number of dissimilar causes; and that it fits in with the other evidence' (Eco, 1990: 166-180).

Film is an audiovisual text composed of different layers (the narrative, the mise-en-scene, the music and the camera and the editing) which are all considered to be potentially important to the construction of the Dark Ages (Bordwell and Thompson, 2004; see also Walker, 2009: 155). Not only the story itself, but also how the story is told and brought to the screen has to be taken into consideration. However, purely aesthetical judgements or analyses are beyond the scope of this study. Many of the films of the corpus have been met with unfavourable reviews by the critics, but this is considered to be irrelevant as long as it does not concern the construction of the medieval.

Additionally, the meaning of the entire film has to be respected. Contrary to Toplin (1988) who accepted 'achievements amid the general wreckage', we argue that smaller fractions of a film always have to be contextualised in the larger film. For example in a pedagogical context it often occurs that smaller fragments are taken out of the film and transferred into a different context (e.g. Blanton-Whetsell and Avrich, 2000: 4; Bouchard, 2000: 41; Stoertz, 2000: 37). For example, the glasses of William of Baskerville can be used as an illustration in a discussion on the history of glasses in general. However, in the context of this study these glasses have to make sense in the film as a whole, meaning that these glasses also characterise William of Baskerville as a character (for example as an intellectual who relies on relatively modern technological aids).

We will analyse the films of the corpus according to five elements:

First, this study is essentially based on a comparative approach between different filmic versions of the Dark Ages. We will focus on recurring elements, the values that give meaning to them and how the narrative develops. However, it is to be expected that films will incorporate or refer to older medievalist traditions. As Eco (1987: 67-68) wrote, 'the Middle Ages have never been reconstructed from scratch: we have always mended or patched them up, as something in which we still live'. This implies the necessity of 'genealogical medievalism', which means to address 'the accumulative production of an idea of the Middle Ages that continually sets the parameters for understanding what that period was' (Marschall, 2007: 4). Filmmakers will easily rely on ready-made meanings, a priori concepts and existing symbols to construct their own version of the Dark Ages. In other words, we will analyse which texts, traditions, opinions, books, paintings or other media the filmmakers relied on to create their cinematic medieval world (see also Bernau, 2009; Engelen, 2007a; Hesling, 2007, 2001b, 2001a; Burt, 2007a: 233; De la Bretèque, 2004: 17; Rietbergen, 2004: 297; Williams, 1990: 2). It is to be expected that films derive most of their meaning from this kind of sources:

> However, while many critics demonize genre films as the tool of the dominant culture, these films, by subtly altering conventions, re-inflecting the narrative and its themes, or blatantly violating the audience's expectations, can also critique both the tradition in which they work and the ideology that gave it birth. Thus, when studying films within a generic tradition, it is important to examine them within the context of that heritage, as an individual film's meaning often lies in its rewriting of earlier texts. (Aronstein, 2005: 4)

Second, although historical accuracy or literary fidelity is 'irrelevant' in case of medievalism (Ortenberg, 2006: x; see also Haydock, 2008: 6; Burt, 2007a: 217; De la Bretèque, 2004: 17), for every film a comparative historical analysis between the known historical sources, or the source novel, and the filmic renderings will be made. This is not to judge the filmic version compared to the known historical sources (see

the Fidelity Model), but it can provide valuable insights into the specific way a filmmaker approached his subject matter. Where pointing out 'errors' and 'anachronisms' can show what a film did *not* do, it cannot *explain* them. An answer will most likely be found in the medievalist tradition. As Kelly and Pugh (2009b: 4) wrote, anachronisms are not to be 'lamented', but to be 'embraced' as 'a means of understanding the cultural work of medievalism'. The question is not if the elements in a film are accurate, but why they have been chosen and how this plays a role in the construct of the Dark Ages. However, on many of the historical topics that are being addressed in this study, as for example the history of witchcraft or the Black Death, a vast amount of material has been published and are in fact to this very day still hotly debated. We therefore consider it sufficient to point out the different strands in the debate as long as it enables us to position a film adequately with regard to the discussion. This holds also true for the cultural tradition(s) related to these topics.

Fourth, a *presentist* analysis, meaning how the film (un)consciously reflects the time during which it was made will be included. Although the intention of the author may not be the fundamental aspect, it can reveal much about the creative process behind the film. Also, when relevant for the construction of the Dark Ages, we will analyse the potential role of the auteur where, despite the comparative drive behind this research, attention will be given to idiosyncratic versions of the Dark Ages.

As the Dark Ages imaginary is a concept to be situated on a mezzo-level, which means that it does not refer to 'the medieval in the cinema', nor does it remain at the micro-level of the case-study. However, this results in an inherent tension between originality and convention:

> While we find patterns within a painting or a sonata or a film, we also find drastic violations of those patterns. Our attention focuses on the patch of paint of a different texture, on the compelling dissonance, on the scenes that don't quite fit. As Shlovsky notes: 'There is 'order' in art, yet not a single column of a Greek temple stands exactly in its proper order; poetic rhythm is similarly to disordered rhythm.' Disunity is also perceived in the art work's relation to other works. The text defines its strangeness not by imitating tradition but by violating it – by breaking conventions, reordering tried elements, shattering our expectations. In all, Formalism's conception of art as a struggle between a stable unity and a dynamic estrangement has a usefulness that transcends any particular medium. (Bordwell, 1981: 4)

We will try to give each film enough credit in its own right which means to have adequate attention for the peculiarities and idiosyncrasies of each individual rendering of the Dark Ages. However, in the end the aim of this study is to arrive at a more general view on the Dark Ages imaginary and its relation to contemporary society. This also implies that so-called 'filmic sins' will be held into account when comparing the known historical facts with their cinematic equivalent. This kind of changes will only be reported and discussed in as far as they are important to understand the construct of the medieval as the Dark Ages.

2.4 Introduction to the Dark Ages Imaginary

Having reached the end of his life, Adso of Melk, in *The Name of the Rose*, starts to write down his testimony on the 'wondrous and terrible events' that he witnessed in his youth in a remote abbey in the dark north of Italy. When he starts to relive his memories, the film cuts to the point where a young Adso, together with his master William of Baskerville, arrives at the abbey. There he was introduced to a strange and dark medieval world that immediately triggered feelings of 'uneasiness that oppressed my heart as we entered the battlements'. During his arrival he witnessed how peasants bringing all sorts of food to the abbey were being treated very unkindly by the monstrous and rude monks. While in return, the abbey threw what essentially are leftovers back to the people, or 'another generous donation by the church to the poor' as William of Baskerville calls it. Later he witnesses how William and the abbot greet each other by kissing each other full on the mouth (while only shortly before a monk committed suicide out of guilt for the 'unnatural caresses' he received from the assistant-librarian monk Berengar). During this conversation between William and the abbot, Adso also learns how the monks fear the presence of the Evil One in the abbey. And this uneasiness is made even worse when they meet the strange old monk Ubertino de Casale, who greets them by ordering them to leave the place at once. Arguably, when Adso of Melk thereafter confesses to William of Baskerville that he does not 'like this place', he is not only voicing his own thoughts, but also those of the audience.

In other words, the audience is introduced to the strange and dark world of the Benedictine abbey in *The Name of the Rose* through the eyes of Adso of Melk. Equally unfamiliar with this dark medieval world, the audience experiences the events that take place in the abbey with the same naïveté as Adso does (De la Bretèque, 2004: 668). In a world that is strange, dark and impenetrable, the audience needs somebody to identify themselves with, and who can function as a Virgil to guide them through the medieval underworld.[21]

As we will see later on, protagonists in films on the Dark Ages are usually characters to which a modern audience can relate and identity with (Cohen, 2001: 257). From this perspective, it is no coincidence that travelling is an important

[21] According to Woods (2004: 43), 'the primary way we participate in medieval film is by taking upon ourselves the hero's problems, planning, feeling his or her hesitation – trying to figure out what we would do in Lancelot's place, for example, had we his beauty and strength, his touching loyalty, and Guinevere'. This is similar to what Kelly and Pugh (2009: 5) wrote on the knights and maidens who 'simultaneously serve as models of behaviour for modern-day audiences engaged in complex identifications with who, or what, is projected on the screen'. Part II of Driver and Rays (eds. 2004) *The Medieval Hero on Screen*, for example, explored the ways 'in which medieval films directed at youthful audiences can impose beliefs on children by offering particular heroes as role models' (Driver and Ray, 2004b: 12, see e.g. Harty, 2004 and Henthorne, 2004).

feature in these films. It is, as Woods (2014: 9) argues, a 'convenient way to begin a narrative'. But more than only being the beginning, it allows the protagonist to arrive in a world which he has to discover himself, and implicitly the audience with him. Richard Courtois in *The Advocate*, for example, is a lawyer who leaves the city (modernity) hoping to find a better life on the countryside (the medieval). However, shortly after his arrival he is, together with the audience of the film, confronted with a world where despite his idealised expectations nothing is reasonable. The travelling artists in *The Seventh Seal*, *The Pied Piper* as well as *The Reckoning* also encounter different medieval situations through their innocent eyes. A related strategy is following a character from their birth to adulthood, as we witness the struggle of Johanna in *Pope Joan* with the medieval world from childhood to her death. Also characters who once belonged to the medieval world, can be 'reborn'. Nicholas at the beginning of *The Reckoning*, having committed adultery as a priest, has to run for his life once this had been discovered. As a way to hide his tonsure, he is shaving off the rest of the hairs on his head. As he is throwing water of his freshly shaven head, it is difficult not to interpret this scene as a rebirth or a rebaptism. In *The Seventh Seal*, Antonius Block has lost his faith during the crusades and has to start on a new quest for meaning in life in the medieval dark society which surrounds him (Haydock, 2008: 41; Marty, 2001: 152).[22] In other words, the protagonists are essentially characters that do not really belong in the dark medieval world. These films explore the mindset and the psychology of the protagonist as well as the way they enter in a conflict with medieval society. They are city lawyers on the country-side, Franciscan monks in a Benedictine abbey or women in a man's world. Furthermore, as they attest a different mindset than their medieval contemporaries, this will lead them into conflict from which the film derives its primary meaning.

In chapter III, we will focus on the conflict between the people and their lord. In this chapter we will discuss the construction of the Dark Ages as the age of feudalism. In this feudal society, the local lord, in the absence of a centralised regime or bureaucracy, is free to rule in a tyrannical or even totalitarian way. As a result, this is the time when the common people were oppressed and exploited by an elite, both the Church and the state. This medieval construct contrasts with our modern idea of individual rights and a participatory democracy.

In chapter IV, we will discuss the Dark Ages as the age of dogmatism because the light of reason has not yet shone upon it. This world is characterised by obscurantism, bigotry, dogmatism, the absence of doubt, and intolerance. It is the time when real science was impossible, which led to a general state of ignorance in

[22] Is it a coincidence that these characters die at the end of the film, as a way to pay for their former sins? The same could be said of the Pilgrim in *The Pied Piper*. Although he used to be a good catholic, during the film he sees through the greed of the Church. Despite this he is amongst the first to die of the plague.

medieval society. This medieval construct contrasts with our idea of a humanistic, open-minded and rational society.

In chapter V, we will discuss the Dark Ages as a primitive and extreme age, characterised by filth, disease (plague) and *extreme* and often unlicensed violence.

According to Woods (2014: 8), there is no solution to these problems during the Middle Ages:

> For the world of medieval movies is not supposed to change, and its people are what they are: that is their mortal flaw and the main reason we love them. Whether they like it or not, there is "No Exit" for these characters. Their Middle Ages cannot be improved, but only reborn as the Renaissance, and so as medieval people they must deal with the things they are. (Woods, 2014: 8).

We do not fully agree with this statement and we will offer redemptive strategies that are offered in the films under discussion here.

As general characterisation, however, films on the dark ages are closely related to the grand narrative of progress. Films on the Dark Ages demonstrate what we once were, but have overcome thanks to good governance, science and a general sense of humanity. These films, in general, attest what Hollister (1992: 7) called 'the indestructible fossil of the self-congratulatory Renaissance humanism'. However, this does not answer the question as to why we return to that age in the cinema. We argue that every film not only reminds its audience of the medieval conditions we have overcome, but also as an implicit warning to keep it that way. By following the example of how the protagonist deals with the conflict in the film, the film offers an example to its audience as well. However, it is also important to keep in mind that films are always a form of commercial entertainment as well, and the medieval world offers escapism, exotism or, more specifically related to the Dark Ages, horror.

III Dark Ages Feudalism

> Malheureux temps où les intempéries du ciel, les inondations, les incendies, les famines, les catastrophes de toute espèce étaient les moindres des maux pour les hommes des champs, exposés chaque jour, chaque heur, chaque seconde, à la peste, l'affreuse peste de la féodalité.
>
> Ch. Fellens, *La féodalité, ou les droits du seigneur,* 18--, p. 10.

> 'They feed and clothe from the blood we sweat.'
>
> The father of the accused woman, *The Reckoning,* McGuigan 2002.

This chapter focuses on the relation between power, the law and the people in films on the Dark Ages. Medievalist films, as well as medievalism in general, are often considered to be inherently anti-modern, anti-individualistic and anti-democratic. According to Bildhauer (2011: 12, 152 & 170), for example, the medieval time was a 'communal time' when the modern individual did not yet exist but still was 'subsumed into a collective body'. From this perspective medieval films create a sense of community, often building on nationalist traditions by for example referring to the medieval roots of the nation or to a glorious event in national history (Geary, 2002: 15-40; Perrin, 1990: 3). As Ramey (2007: 151) wrote, these films 'wittingly or unwittingly encourage bonds among people who seek to exclude others based on race, class, or gender – a danger, I would argue, inherent to medievalism' (see also Mathews, 2011: 696; Bernau, 2009; Driver and Ray, 2004b: 5 & 9; Aronstein, 2000: 145). Examples of this are ample in the cinema with depictions of Joan of Arc, William Wallace, Henry V and Agincourt, the Nibelungen, El Cid, the Battle of the Golden Spurs, Alexander Nevsky and many others. And the Arthurian world, despite its English, monarchist and elitist character, now serves as a preferred projection screen for American politics, a tradition that Aronstein (2005: 1-2) called the 'Hollywood Arthuriana' (see supra, 1.3.2, pp. 49-50; Finke and Shichtman, 2010: 156-180; Kelly, 2007: 283; Mancoff, 1998; De la Bretèque, 1995: 56-57, 1996: 161; Harty, 1991; Lagorio, 1989: 151-169; Garet, 1983: 5-8). These medieval worlds are characterised by a focus on the 'ideal masculinity […] whiteness, heterosexuality, youth, strength and entitlement', allowing a 'great potential in escapism, romance, heroism, and spectacular images' (Driver and Ray, 2004b: 5 & 9; see also Kelly and Pugh, 2009: 4-5; Kelly, 2004: 10; Williams, 1999: 9).

This construction of medieval society is ideologically linked to the concept of 'body politics' expressed in the ideal, stable and hierarchical kingdom constructed around a King who rules by divine right, the nation he embodies and the knights who

defend him (Kantorowicz, 1997: 7-23; see also Elliott, 2010: 83-112; Kennedy, 1975: 192; Chroust, 1947: 423-452). It also offers a means to explore what makes a nation perfect as well as what the potential threats may be. Especially the legends on King Arthur provide a narrative 'that explores the nature and exercise of political authority, providing ideological legitimacy for the political institution of the monarchy and defining the nature of the individual's political obligation with the institution' (Finke and Shichtman, 2010: 73). In other words, it not only offers an example on how the King should govern, but also how his subjects should behave. With Galahad and Parsifal it showcases the heroic efforts of the perfect knight, while with Lancelot (or Tristan) it can explore matters of honour and loyalty in a more complex way.

Films on the Dark Ages offer a completely different perspective on medieval society and politics. While it could be stated that these films also reflect on what makes a perfect society, they fundamentally diverge from the ideology of the 'body politics' as is the case in the abovementioned construction of the Middle Ages. We argue that the underlying structuring element for medieval socio-political society in films on the Dark Ages is feudalism (see Reynolds, 2010: 201). In a feudal medieval society the focus lies on the relation between an usurping elite and the people they exploit. These films propagate essentially leftist, democratic and cosmopolitan values. They offer history from below, where the protagonist is not linked to the elite but is a representative of the common people. From this perspective we argue that besides the exclusive focus on the Renaissance as being responsible for ending the Middle Ages, the French Revolution played an important role as well in ending the medieval age. We will start by clarifying what is meant with the concept of 'feudalism' after which we will apply it to the corpus of films on the Dark Ages.

3.1 Dark Ages feudalism

Contrary to the 'body politics' of the idealised medieval kingdom stands the feudal society. Similar to the discussion on the meaning of the 'Middle Ages' (see supra, 1.3.1), feudalism is a multi-layered concept that hovers between a hard to define historical concept and its often pejorative use in popular culture. While in its first meaning it refers to an actual way the Middle Ages were organised from the ninth to the thirteenth century AD, in its more popular use feudalism essentially stands for a society where a privileged nobility oppresses and exploits an impoverished peasantry for their own gain, or to prerogatives of an elite that are considered to be illegal or more specifically out-dated. For example, when in Belgium King Albert II abdicated on July 21st 2013 in favour of his eldest son Philippe, the word 'feudal' was used in discussions where adversaries of the monarchy accused the King of having power without a mandate from the people. Similarly, when the King awarded noble titles, it was referred to as a medieval and outdated act.[23]

3.1.1 'The tyranny of feudalism'

From a historical perspective, feudalism refers to how medieval society was organised judicially, militarily and politically. Most definitions of feudalism refer to a system of government based on interpersonal bonds, rituals and oaths where the King (or a lord) donated land (the fief) to a subordinate (the vassal) who, in exchange, promised to pay taxes and to offer military aid when called for by the lord. The origins of feudalism lie in the waning of the Carolingian world around 750 AD and it peaked between the tenth and the thirteenth century, which is considered to be the classical age of feudalism (Little and Rosenwein, 1998b: 107; Van Kieft, 1974: 194; Herlihy, 1970a: xi; Ganshof, 1952: 152-153; Berr, 1949: vii-viii; Bloch, 1949: 223-366).

However, the exact historical meaning of 'feudalism' remains unclear. The debate started shortly after Marc Bloch published his *La société féodale* in 1940. Bloch's rather comprehensive and European oriented perspective was questioned by Duby (1953) who claimed, after studying the Mâconnais region, that a more detailed, region- and time-specific approach was required as the meaning of feudalism diverged significantly in time and place. Also Bloch's perspective of continuity during

[23] See for example an interview with Alexander De Croo 'Een koning die gratie kan verlenen, dat is toch middeleeuws' in *De Morgen* (20/07/2013), Theo Francken's 'Brief aan de Koning', *Knack* (10/07/2013) or Jan Callebaut's column 'Ik wil koning worden', *De Morgen* (06/07/2013). 'N-VA wil geen 'middeleeuwse' adellijke titels meer', *De Morgen*, (15/04/2014).

the transition from the Carolingian institutions to feudalism has been heavily debated on when feudalism as such first appeared and whether it was not more like a 'mutation' or even a 'revolution' rather than a continuity, again depending on differences in time and place (Cheyette, 2002: 291; Barthélemy, 1992: 767-777, 1998: 134-147; Barthélemy and White, 1996; Bisson, 1994: 6-7). In fact, the meaning attributed to 'feudalism' is often dependent on the author who uses it. Where some authors prefer a more narrow technical and legal definition of feudalism (see Ganshof, 1952: xv-xvi) others emphasise the social aspects of a feudal society (see Bloch's title *La société féodale*, 1949). Others use it as an ideal type of government and yet others consider feudalism to be typical of what happens when central institutions disappear and are replaced by a system of ad hoc interpersonal agreements. Some consider the economical situation or the production system to be a part of feudalism, for which 'manorialism' could be used as well, while feudalism can also refer to the relation between the lord and his peasants, for which 'seigneurie' could also be used (Little and Rosenwein, 1998b: 111-113; Reynolds, 1994: 2; Brown, 1974: 1065, 1071-1075 & 1082; Van Kieft, 1974: 193-211; Herlihy, 1970b: xviii; Duby, 1953: 94-116).

This confusion on the meaning of 'feudalism' has brought Elizabeth Brown in her seminal article *The Tyranny of a Construct: Feudalism and Historians of Medieval Europe* (1974) to question the value of the concept. As historians kept looking for specific 'feudal' elements in medieval society, while using a concept that is too widely used and too diversely defined, it threatened to overlook other elements of medieval society that did not fit this 'feudal' framework, as well as it allowed the dubious construct of feudalism to endure (see also Reynolds, 1994: 2 & 3).

Similar to the meaning of 'the Middle Ages', the existence of the concept of 'feudalism' largely predates the contemporary historical definitions. Already from the sixteenth century onwards the term was used and from the seventeenth century onwards it was already used to refer to the Middle Ages as a monolithic whole. At this point the meaning of the word 'feudal' already referred to those elements of medieval society which were to be abolished and no longer should have a place in contemporary society (Brown, 1974: 1064-1065 & 1086; Herlihy, 1970b: xvii). A famous example of the use of 'feudalism' to designate the entire medieval period is Adam Smith's (1723-1790) *An Inquiry into the nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations* (1776) where he introduced his concept of 'the age of feudal government' as a de facto synonym for the Middle Ages. This feudal age was the third stage in his construction of a world history, in which neither the workers nor the goods were free to move according to the invisible hand of the free market as they were oppressed and tied to the land by their lords (Jackson, 2004: 187; Heffernan, 1994; Salter, 1992; Herlihy, 1970b: xvi).

The meaning of the concept of 'feudalism' in its socio-political meaning originated in the eighteenth and especially nineteenth century where it became

synonymous with the Ancient Regime. In Marx' typology, for example, 'feudalism' was the stage that preceded capitalism, defined as running from 400 AD to 1800 AD, and was used to refer to an age of exploitation and domination of the serfs by their lord (Reynold, 2010: 201-203; MacVarish, 2005: 501-508; Hilton and Hill, 1953: 340-351; Sweezy and Dobb, 1950: 134-167).[24] A similar construct of feudalism proved to be very influential in the debates on the French Revolution. Seen from this perspective the French Revolution was the result of an Ancient Regime that was characterised by an elite who was not only exploiting the peasantry, but also limiting all commercial and industrial expansion. As this regime was hereditary, the social inequalities endured and remained inflexible to changes in demography, agriculture and industry. Due to substantial changes in the economy, such as the industrial revolution and the rise of a third estate, tensions rose between this bourgeois and capitalist fraction and the old aristocratic and feudal society. In the end these tensions proved to be untenable and led to the French Revolution (Bull, 2005: 57; Reynolds, 1994: 3-14; Brown, 1974: 1065; Cavanaugh, 1972: 588; Herlihy, 1970b: xiii-xx; Ganshof, 1952: xv). This narrative emphasising social class as the motor behind the Revolution (as for example advocated by Jean Jaurès, Albert Mathiez, Georges Lefebvre and Albert Soboul) has been contested (by e.g. Alfred Cobban and François Furet) and was from the 1970's onwards generally abandoned in favour of more political explanations. As the critics of this 'bourgeois myth' argue, there was no strict divide between the bourgeoisie and the nobility as from the fourteenth century onwards members of the bourgeoisie were buying themselves into nobility which essentially meant that they were an interdependent entity rather than two opposing forces (Heller, 2010: 184-214; MacVarish, 2005: 496; Spang, 2003: 119; Lemarchand, 1991: 14; Kaiser, 1979: 204-205; Cavanaugh, 1972: 589-590; Ganshof, 1952: 152-153). However, during the nineteenth century a strong divide was made between the feudal ancient regime and post-Revolutionary France which would prove to be enduring in popular culture.

During the nineteenth century the Middle Ages were represented as a feudal age characterised by an inequality between the elite and the common people. The ancient regime was considered to be an age of 'feudal anarchy', as there was a lack of central authority or administration and no unified law for the entire country, which resulted in all-powerful local baronies. These ideas were mostly linked to a post-Revolutionary discourse which became most influential at the middle of the nineteenth century. Where in 1815 the monarchy in France had been restored as a result of the Congress of Vienna, the July Revolution of 1830 again expelled the ruling monarchs. The advocates of this event considered this to be a 'Second Revolution'. The newly installed regime led by Louis-Philippe d'Orléans, however, turned out not

[24] As Reynolds (1994: 10-11) points out, feudalism is not often used as a term on its own, but it is mostly used in its relation to another concept (see also Tonomura, 1999).

to be what the pro-revolutionaries wanted. As a response, books were written on the history of the French Revolution to remind the people of the Revolutionary values and the importance of the Republic. Famous examples of such authors were Alphonse Lamartine, Louis Blanc and Jules Michelet. Jules Michelet, for example, in his *Le Peuple* (1846) and *Histoire de la Révolution française* (1847-1853) became an influential advocate of the people and fiercely attacked nobility as well as the clerical elite. He considered the history of France to be a gradual struggle for freedom by the people which culminated in the French Revolution (Raedts, 2011: 207-226; Viallaneix, 1971; Rearick, 1971: 77). In 1848 the February Revolution seemed to hold the promise of once again being a true Revolution, but also the French Second Republic (1848-1851) proved to be short-lived (Kluchert, 1992: 85-99; Fortescue, 1987: 261; Mitzman, 1987: 457; Reboul, 1986: 19; Cobban, 1946: 13-15).

This anti-feudal sentiment remained strong in nineteenth-century in France. An example of this is the novel by Charles Fellens (18--) under the telling title *La féodalité, ou les droits du seigneur: événements mystérieux, lugubres, scandaleux, exactions, despotisme, libertinage de la noblesse et du clergé; suivis de la marche et la décadence de la féodalité, depuis le moyen-âge jusqu'à nos jours*. Not coincidentally, it is in this context that the notorious *droit de cuissage* or *ius primae noctis*, where the lord had the right to sleep with the wife of his serfs on their wedding night, was mostly debated – but to this day there is no historical evidence suggesting that this actually existed (Boureau, 1995: 256). Other remarkable stories recount how villagers were obliged to make noise at the pond during the night to silence the frogs, so their lord could sleep peacefully. It even went as far to tell gruesome stories on how the lords, after a cold hunt, cut the belly of their servants open to warm their feet in their entrails (Amalvi, 1994: 221-223; Reynolds, 1994: 8-9; Bisson, 1994: 40-41; Pernoud, 1977: 55; Herlihy, 1970: xvii; Cobban, 1964: 25-35; Kurth, 18--: 12).

Au nom du Père, du Fils, et du Saint-Esprit ; au nom du Dieu de bonté et de miséricorde... tuez, pendez, brûlez.

'Au nom du Père, du Fils, et du Saint-Esprit; au nom du Dieu de bonté et de miséricorde… tuez, pendez, brûlez.'
Title page of Fellens' *La Féodalité* (18--).

3.1.2 Cinematic Dark Ages Feudalism

> Simplifying, but then this is essentially a *conte de fées*, the outline of the story is that there was once a social order called feudalism. This was a terrible ogre and lived in a castle; but for centuries a bourgeois Jack the Giant-Killer climbed the beanstalk of economic progress, until finally in the French Revolution he liquidated the old order and put in its place something called alternatively bourgeois society or capitalism.
>
> A. Cobban, *The Myth of the French Revolution*, 1955, p. 8.

In this chapter we argue that the medieval political society in films on the Dark Ages is constructed according to this French nineteenth-century construct of the Middle Ages as a feudal age. This society is essentially characterised by an elite oppressing the people until the Revolution will set them free. First, we will describe the characteristics of the elite. We will do this by analysing the fictionalised feudal context in *The Pied Piper* and the partly fictionalised feudal context in *Le moine et la sorcière*. We will also focus on variations such as the inclusion of the myth of the Norman Yoke in *The Reckoning* or the patriarchal representation of feudalism in *La Passion Béatrice*. Next we will focus on the clerical side of feudalism and finally on the legal aspects of feudalism in *The Advocate*.

In a second section we will describe the role of the people in these films, with special focus on the protagonists as representatives of the people. Additionally, we will discuss the 'solution' to this medieval situation. Contrary to Wood's (2014: 8) statement that there is no escaping the medieval but through the Renaissance, we offer three additional ways of how the medieval was overcome (revolution, resilience and the plague as a *deus ex machina*). According to this French narrative, the idea of a revolution will be important (*The Name of the Rose*, *La Passion Béatrice* and *The Reckoning*), but other films offer a strategy of resiliency (*Le moine et la sorcière* and *Pope Joan*), where other and more pessimistic films have to resort to supernatural help (*The Pied Piper*, *The Advocate* and *Anazapta*). As politics only play a minor role in *The Seventh Seal*, *Black Death* and *Anazapta*, they will only be briefly mentioned.

3.2 The Elite: 'They feed and clothe…'

In this section we will analyse the filmic construct of the elite, as opposed to the people, from a socio-political point of view. Essentially the elite is negatively evaluated as they force their impoverished peasants into hard labour, while they live in luxury and are free to do as they please. This will be demonstrated in *The Pied Piper* and *Le moine et la sorcière*, where in both cases a negative construct of nobility was added compared with the text on which they were based. With *The Reckoning* we will focus on the inclusion of the English myth of the Norman Yoke in a feudal society and focus on the role of the (absent) King. In *La Passion Béatrice* the feudal society is symbolised in the patriarchal usurpation of François de Cortemare. The construct of feudalism, however, is not restricted to the secular power as also the Church can act as a power institute that demands more from their flock than only prayers. In some cases the Church is a mere accomplice, but in others they act as the main feudal usurper. For this we will focus on *The Name of the Rose, Pope Joan, Anazapta* and *Black Death*. Finally we will give attention to *The Advocate* as this film focuses extensively on the judiciary aspects of feudal society.

3.2.1 Constructing a medieval feudal society

Both *Le moine et la sorcière* and *The Pied Piper* explicitly claim that they were based on a specific historical source text. *Le moine et la sorcière* was based on the exemplum *De Adoratione Guinefortis Canis* ('De l'adoration du Chien Guinefort'), written by the thirteenth-century Dominican Inquisitor Etienne de Bourbon in his *Tractatus de Diversis Materiis Praedicabilibus* (ca. 1261). *The Pied Piper* was based on Robert Browning's *The Pied Piper of Hamelin: A Child's Story* (1842). What both films did not mention, however, was that in both cases a socio-political context was added to this source text. In the following section, we will analyse this fictionalised feudal context.

a) The textbook feudal society in The Pied Piper

The Pied Piper by Jacques Demy made two fundamental changes to the original poem by Robert Browning, namely a fictionalised feudal political context and the plague were added to the story. Here we will only discuss the feudal society of the film as a textbook example of a feudal society (for the plague, cf. infra, 5.1.2b). Where in the poem there is only mention of the Burgomaster and his town council (or 'the

Corporation'), the film also includes members of nobility with the Baron Poppendick and his son Franz as well as the clergy with the Bishop and a papal nuncio. Where shortly before in *Peau d'Âne* (1970) Demy had created a fairy-tale medieval world with Kings and princesses, in *The Pied Piper* the political context is constructed according to the Dark Ages feudalism. The film offers a political situation of an elite that exploits the people to reach their own personal goals. The Burgomaster, for example, wants to gain more leverage and influence at court so he marries his daughter off to Franz, the son of the Baron. Franz, who is a warlike person, needs the dowry as he wants to continue his splendid little wars. But as he keeps losing these wars by getting captured, this means that the town council has to pay for his ransom. Additionally, the Baron wants to build a cathedral for his own personal salvation, or in other words to 'buy his way out of Hell', and is supported by the Bishop who wants a cathedral 'for the reparation of sin and the glorification of God'. The papal nuncio wants to levy troops to fight for the Pope in order to get a new Emperor (as the Emperor wants a new Pope).[25] In order to reach their goals, all actors try to lobby for their cause with the others. For example, if the Baron can deliver troops to fight for the Pope's causes, than he will receive money from the papal nuncio to build his cathedral. Franz suggests to offer troops to his father if he gets half of the papal money. And finally, the Burgomaster wants the town council to pay for the wedding by installing a new tax, but everything has already been taxed – except for luxury items that are only used by the members of the town council themselves.

Sole victims of this high-level scheming are the people. They are taxed either by the baron or by the town council and have to deliver masons to build the cathedral as well as soldiers to fight in the war. If they do not comply they can easily be whipped, thrown into the dungeon or executed. Symbolic of the decadence of nobility is the plan of Franz to recruit the children of Hamelin to become soldiers to fight for the Pope against the Emperor so he can get half of the papal reward. During the battle of Crecy, during which Franz was captured, he saw boys of twelve and thirteen years old fighting or as he puts it 'dying as nobly as the next'. Franz knows there is no money to pay regular troops, so he wants the town's alchemist Melius to make him fool's gold to trick the children. However, at that time of the story the threat of the Black Death had become real, and Melius was looking for a cure. Melius tried to raise awareness of the threat in the town council, but he was thrown out by the Burgomaster who only wanted to focus on the wedding which will give him more power. And as Melius refused to sacrifice his precious time to save the city by making fool's gold for Franz, he is thrown in the dungeon and burned for heresy. Not much later, the Black Death ravages the town.

[25] This refers to the Investiture Controversy, historically set in the eleventh and twelfth century between Henry IV, emperor of the Holy Roman Empire, and Pope Gregory VII. At stake was the question on who had the authority to appoint church officials.

In other words, nobody of the elite takes an interest in the well-being of the people or the common good. This short sighted politics of self-interest proved to be fatal in a context of the Black Death when measures had to be taken. This anti-political and anti-catholic perspective of the film can be seen in the anti-establishment context of the sixties' and early seventies' counterculture (Lucas, 2008: 88; also Daems, 1979: 26). At the time the film was read as a 'neo-marxist fairy tale' based on class-antagonism and where the fools' gold of Franz was read as a metaphor for 'the function of money in present capitalist society. Lacking any real value, its worth depends exclusively on the intervention of the capitalist' (Humphries, 1976: 16-17). The Scottish singer-songwriter Donovan, who played the character of the Pied Piper in the film, was at the height of his career at that point, and was at the time also a prominent representative of the hippy-movement. Although being set in a fairy tale medievalist context, the film still offers an anti-mainstream message typical of Nouvelle Vague that was easily inclined to question dominant culture (Hill, 2008: 384).[26] The specific meaning of the Black Death and the role of the Piper will be discussed in the chapter on the plague.

b) Shifting the blame in Le moine et la sorcière

In *Le moine et la sorcière* the fictionalised feudal context is more elaborated. The exemplum *De Adoratione Guinefortis Canis* on which the film is based is about a case of superstition that Etienne de Bourbon encountered when he was preaching in the Dombes area in France (for the source text, see Schmitt, 1979: 13-17). He discovered a cult where a greyhound was being revered as a (human) saint, which was linked to a pagan child healing ritual performed by an old woman in the Sacred Woods. Except the notion that all this took place 'sur la terre du sire de Villars' and that the local authorities agreed with De Bourbon's wish to end this cult ('Et j'ai fait prendre par les seigneurs de la terre un édit prévoyant la saisie et le rachat des biens de ceux qui affluераient désormais en ce lieu pour une telle raison.' in Schmitt, 1979: 15 & 17), there is no additional contextual information about the economical or political conditions of the village. The film, however, added a substantial storyline on the count de Villars which is constructed according to the concept of feudalism. We will discuss three elements of the feudal society in *Le moine et la sorcière*. First, the way the film retells the events of the original story as written by Etienne de Bourbon attests some

[26] The position of Jacques Demy in the Nouvelle Vague is often marginalised as the focus lies with the so-called *Cahiers* group of the Right Bank of Paris with Godard, Truffaut, Rivette, Chabrol or Romer while Demy belonged to the so-called Left Bank group with Varda and Resnais (Hill, 2008: 382; Neupert, 2007: 63 & 361).

small, yet significant changes that created a negative atmosphere on the count de Villars. Second, we will discuss a second storyline on the count de Villars that specifically deals with how he exploited his serfs for his own gain. Third, we will discuss the fictionalised nobility of Etienne de Bourbon's cinematic character.

First, the way the story of Etienne de Bourbon is translated to the screen hints at a more negative appraisal of the political rulers in the film than can be found in De Bourbon's text. The story begins with a greyhound that saves the life of the lord's son from a snake that had entered the child's bedroom. However, during the fight between the dog and the snake, the cradle was knocked over and the baby thrown on the floor. When the lord heard this noise and entered the room, all he saw was the bloody muzzle of his dog and his son lying on the floor. Holding his dog responsible for this he immediately kills the dog. Shortly afterwards, he realised his mistake as his dog in fact saved his son. In regret, he buries the dog outside the castle under a pile of rocks and planted trees next to it. Later, when the castle was destroyed and the lands had become deserted, the local inhabitants made the dog into a martyr and a saint. De Bourbon wrote that women came to the place offering their sick babies to an old woman who then healed these children with ancient rites. When De Bourbon found out about this, he considered the cult of the sacred greyhound to be a case of 'superstition' and the accompanying rites to be dangerous for the children which made him intervene. He went to the place, preached to the people and had the bones of the dog dug up and burned them together with the sacred wood.

In the film, the story of the snake and the greyhound is recounted at the very beginning by means of a flashback with extradiegetical narration. The way this story is retold, however, is subtly but significantly changed to where a negative atmosphere is created against the count de Villars, which cannot be found in the text by De Bourbon. First, where in the Latin source text the count is called a 'miles', translated by Schmitt (1979: 16) as 'chevalier', who killed the dog with his 'spatam' or his 'épée' has become the more neutral 'père de l'enfant' in the films, or a 'nobleman' in the English subtitles.[27] Additionally, he kills the dog with a spear and not with a sword. Also his fine and colourful clothing attest that this man has nothing in common with how knights or soldiers are represented, but is a member of non-military aristocracy. More significantly, however, the focus in the film is shifted towards the peasants and neglect his side of the story. In the original text it is the 'miles' himself who recognises his mistake after having killed his dog:

[27] According to Bloch 'miles' should be translated by 'chevalier' from the ninth century onwards: 'A la lettre, le second terme [miles] devrait se traduire par 'soldat'. Mais les textes français, dès leur apparition, le rendront par 'chevalier' et c'était certainement cette expression de la langue non écrite que déjà les notaires d'autrefois avaient eue en tête' (Bloch, 1949: 249). Whether or not this still holds true in a thirteenth-century context is not clear.

> Reconnaissant alors la vérité du fait, et déplorant d'avoir tué si injustement un chien tellement utile, ils le jetèrent dans un puits situé devant la porte du château, jetèrent sur lui une très grande masse de pierres et plantèrent à côté des arbres en mémoire de ce fait. (Schmitt, 1979: 16)

In the film the story goes as follows:

> *Le père de l'enfant* venait d'ôté la vie à Guinefort, fidèle lévrier, lorsqu'il compris que celui-ci avait sauvé son fils unique de l'attaque du serpent. Touché par l'injustice de sa mort, *les paysans* posaient une pierre dans sa tombe et le vénéraient à l'égale d'un martyr. Au longe des siècles la légende s'enracina dans la région des Dombes. (italics mine)
>
> [English subtitles:] The *nobleman* killed his faithful dog Guinefort who in fact had saved the life of his only son. Moved by this unjust death *the peasants* laid a stone on his grave and venerated the dog as a saint. His martyrdom became a legend in this isolated region of France.' (italics mine)

While it still is the father of the child who realises that he unjustly killed his dog, it are the *peasants* who honour the dog for it and omit the part of the regretful 'miles' despite that it was he who buried the dog giving him a memorial stone and planted trees next to the grave. It is clear that the focus, from the very beginning of the film, will lie on the peasants in contrast with a negative representation of the lords.

Second and more importantly, a storyline on the count de Villars was added to the story.[28] According to the village priest the land rents were no longer enough to maintain his manor, so the count needed a way to gain more money. The way he does this is characteristic of a feudal context as he floods the lands of one his serfs, Artaud, so the count could raise and sell carps. For Artaud and his family this means that they are left with only a few other barren fields which makes their living very difficult. When Artaud's wife is complaining about this to Etienne de Bourbon, she claims that the count cannot steal their right to sow the seed as it is 'like the rain or the sun, it can't be taken'. The film presents it as a natural right of the peasants to work on their land. In addition, these new ponds attracted all kinds of insects which made the children of the village sick (which we learn as Elda has to make potions for them). The serf who had lost his lands, Artaud, takes action against his lord and breaks the dam in order to drain the pond and kill all the fish. It doesn't take long before the count knows who was behind this act of rebellion and throws him into prison to starve. Not much later the count appears in the local church and warns the villagers that 'all who destroy my property will be executed'. In other words, the villagers are only instruments that serve to enhance or maintain the wealth of the count, no matter the cost for the villagers. Those who do not comply will be executed at will, without trial.

[28] When De Bourbon mentions the contemporary lord with whom he destroyed the remains of the dog and the sacred woods, he only mentions 'les seigneurs de la terre' without further specification (Schmitt, 1979: 17). Before this took place, however, 'le château fut détruit par la volonté divine et la terre, ramenée à l'état de désert, abandonnée par l'habitant' (Schmitt, 1979: 16).

As director Susanne Schiffman described the role of Féodor Atkine, the actor who played the count de Villars, he was 'l'ogre ou Barbe Bleu, pas de nuances' (Schiffman in Chevrie, 1987).

Additionally, this film also mentions the notorious *droit de cuissage* or the *ius primae noctis*, one of the most vile symbols of the degradation of the serfs by the medieval lords. It offers a clear example that the serfs did not even own their own bodies as the lords could invade into their personal life and autonomy at a disturbing level (Boureau, 1995: 10; Amalvi, 1994: 223; Bullough, 1991: 163). This issue was heavily debated in the nineteenth and twentieth century, but to this day there is no evidence of its historical existence (Boureau, 1995: 251). There are reported cases of sexual abuse of a servant girl by their lord, but these cases are to be treated as rape, not as the right of the lord (Bullough, 1991: 163). In the film it is Elda, the wise woman from the woods, who was raped by her local lord when she was only sixteen and before she became the wise woman of the woods. Her betrothed died when he tried to protect her from the guards of the lord who came to claim her (see infra, 4.2.2a, pp.174-176).

Thirdly, the film adds a fictionalised back-story that turns the Etienne de Bourbon into a member of nobility. Where historians consider the similarity in name between Etienne De Bourbon and the French royal family De Bourbon as fortuitous (Benson, 1999: 59; Berlioz, 1989: 5; Schmitt, 1979: 23; Lecoy de la Marche, 1877: iij-iv), for screenwriter Pamela Berger (1995: 97) his family name 'revealed that the must have been a nobleman', while at the same time admitting that 'we know nothing about his family'. We argue that this is also part of the construct of the medieval as a feudal society. When Etienne de Bourbon first meets the count de Villars, he is recognised by the count as a member of nobility. As members of the same class, he immediately expects Etienne to help him in his fight against the rebellion of his serfs. When Etienne refuses to do so, this angers the count and calls Etienne a coward. This triggers a memory, which is shown in flashback revealing a fictionalised back-story on Etienne, where he was called a coward before by his father. Because he could not stand the sight of a deer being gutted, his angered father called him 'not man enough to gut a prey' and a coward. Etienne ran away from his father, and through a cut to Etienne running in the present the montage suggests that he is still running away from this traumatic event. Later, the film shows that while he was running, he raped a peasant girl as well. It was for this crime that he joined the Dominican order. According to Stoertz (2000: 39) this motivation to join the Dominicans was 'designed to appeal to twentieth-century audiences who often find the concept of joining a mendicant order rather foreign'. However, we argue that this reinforces the elitist character of the Church and the general impunity of the elite. As he joined the Church he could no longer be tried by secular law and, just as the lord who raped Elda,

remained unpunished for it. Additionally, by joining the clerical elite he no longer controlled the peasant's bodies, as he was now claiming authority over their souls. Also when the village priest first meets Etienne, he immediately recognises him by his family name as a member of nobility: 'De Bourbon … mais sire alors', translated in the English subtitles as: 'De Bourbon … a nobleman's son'. We argue that this is not only 'an effective representation between noble and commoner, but also of the divisions between regular and secular clergy' making it 'an accurate representation of the relationship between regular and secular clergy' as Benson (1999: 59) argues. We argue that this is more a strategy to make De Bourbon into a member of the elite in order to make him opposed to the people. During his first converstation with the village priest, Etienne De Bourbon informs him of his mission to find heresy. And when the inquisition finds someone to be guilty, they hand him over to the secular powers which, as if implied in mutual understanding, executes the will of the inquisition. This is demonstrated at the end of the film when the count de Villars is more than eager to set an example by burning the woman handed over to him by De Bourbon.

As these three examples attest, *Le moine et la sorcière* is constructing a polarised class society divided between the people and nobility. Later in this chapter we will discuss the reaction of the peasants against this feudal oppression. In the next chapter we will also see how a similar divide is made between the dogmatic and fanatic inquisitor De Bourbon and the rational and tolerant Elda (see infra, 4.1.2).

3.2.2 The Norman Yoke and the absence of the King in *The Reckoning*

What makes the construction of the feudal society in *The Reckoning* remarkable, is the inclusion of the myth of the Norman Yoke. From the very beginning, the film evokes this myth:

> England, 1380. For more than three hundred years, Norman barons have ruled their domains with absolute power. Church and State speak with one voice – to maintain existing order…

According to the myth of the Norman Yoke the native Anglo-Saxon population of England lived in freedom and equality and was ruled peacefully by a representative regime. When William the Conqueror defeated Harold at Hastings in 1066 this mythic Golden Age ended as the Norman conquerors deprived the Anglo-Saxons of their rights and freedom and installed a feudal and tyrannical rule. From then on, the myth focuses on the struggle between the Saxons and the Normans, of which the Magna Carta is seen as the largest success of the Saxons. This myth, however, originating in the sixteenth century in the context of nationalist discourses, was linked to the rise of

an urban class who felt restricted by the elite and projected their aspirations into the past (Golding, 2000: 17; Simmons, 1990; Hill, 1958: 50-122). In the nineteenth century the myth had lost its political influence, but the cultural resonances remained strong in the work of historians such as Augustin Thierry and Edward Freeman or writers such as Sir Walter Scott's *Ivanhoe* (1819), Kingsley's *Hereward the Wake* (1866) or Tennyson's *Harold* (1876) (Melman, 1991: 575-595). Although Sturtevant (2010: 34-35) declared the influence of the myth to be dead, it still appears to be very much alive in popular memory (see for example Brownlie, 2012) and continues to appear on the screen as the TV-film *1066* (Hardy 2009) or Ridley Scott's recent *Robin Hood* (2010) attest.

With *The Reckoning* in 2002 it was not the first time that the myth of Norman Yoke was used in the cinema. In *The Black Rose* (Hathaway 1950) or *Ivanhoe* (Thorpe 1952), the divide between Normans and Saxons threatened to destroy the country's unity in the absence of the King. Also in *Becket* (Glenville 1964) the divide between the people and the oppressor was expressed in terms of Normans and Saxons. The film, based on Jean Anouilh's play *Becket, or the Honor of God* (1959), inspired by Augustin Thierry's *History of the Conquest of England by the Normans* (1825) created this divide between Normans and Saxons to reinforce the conflict in the film between the Norman Henry II and the Saxon Becket, where Becket historically was of Norman descent as well. This was aimed to create the suggestion of collaboration of a Saxon with a Norman and whether or not this could be done with honour, an important question in post-Vichy France (Finke and Shichtman, 2010: 86-98).

In *Morality Play* (Unsworth, 1995), the novel on which *The Reckoning* was based, the Norman Yoke is never mentioned nor evoked. As the film at the start refers to the Yoke it immediately triggers the meaning of oppression and usurpation by a Norman lord. Illustrative of the Norman Yoke is the character of the lord De Guise, a pun on 'déguisé' or 'in disguise', who has been Romanised in the film. Where he was called 'Richard' in the novel, he became 'Robert' in the film and was played by French actor Vincent Cassel. In *The Reckoning*, similar to *The Advocate* and to a lesser extent *La Passion Béatrice*, De Guise is an usurping lord who hunts, sodomises and kills children for his own pleasure. Where the lord of *Le moine et la sorcière* was an Ogre or Bluebeard, in this film an explicit link is made to Bluebeards equal in the character of Gilles de Rais (1404-1440) (see e.g. Hyatte, 1984: 10; Bataille, 1965: 17-22). De Rais was, besides once being one of the most powerful men in France and a former comrade-in-arms of Jeanne d'Arc (Vincent Cassel also played the character of Gilles de Rais in *The Messenger: The Story of Joan of Arc*, Besson 1999), accused of at least forty child rapes, tortures and murders. Although his guilt has never been formally attested, his history has become a legend which made him nothing less than 'one of the most cruel and perverted serial murderers, pedophiles and necrophiles in the

history of humanity' (Mrozowicki, 2010: 33; see also Frei, 2013: 17; Castellani, 1996; Hyatte, 1984: 9-26; Bataille, 1966).

When he was confronted with his crimes, De Guise reveals that the only motivation that drove him was that he did it, because he *could*. He called Power to be his one true God. It allowed him to enjoy his perversion without any consequences. This thirst for power also brought him to plot against the English King, which would be Richard II (1377-1399) as the film is set in 1380. During the film we see De Guise gather fellow lords, who all have French-sounding names. It is this plot that triggered the presence of the King's Justice in the film.

What makes *The Reckoning* a peculiar film is that the King is only represented by the King's Justice and he does not arrive at the end of the film to set things right. In *Ivanhoe*, for example, where a Norman elite was supporting King John's cause against Richard the Lionhearted, Richard returns just in time to save the day and unite the Normans and the Saxons. Also in *The Black Rose* (Hathaway 1950) it is the King who has to unite the Normans and the Saxons. But as the plot of the film is set in 1270, it is Edward I who unifies England in the end instead of Richard (see also Richards, 1977: 102). Also in the Robin Hood narrative, it is King Richard who returns and brings peace to the country. Traditionally, the King is the centrepiece of the medieval society.[29] The King in *The Reckoning*, however, is more portrayed as a politician, who is only interested in his own affairs and neglects his own people. Through the King's Justice we learn that the King knew about De Guise's perversion when they were on campaign in France, but did nothing as he needed his troops. But now, as the King learned that De Guise is plotting against him, he sends out his representative to obtain 'justice'. This negative portrayal of a King is not quite in line with the English tradition on representing the King or feudalism, for that matter. According to Elliott (2010: 84), the King in the English tradition is usually a good character and claims that the 'kings par excellence' in medievalist films are the 'Kings of England'. This stands in sharp contrast with the French Kings, where the royal line has been violently interrupted in 1789 which is not the case in England. Additionally feudalism in England is more associated with strong central power and military service rather than the tradition of the 'feudal anarchy' as a result of weak central power in France.

Despite evoking the English myth of the Norman Yoke, we argue that *The Reckoning* is more related to the French concept of feudalism. We will elaborate further on this issue later in this chapter.

[29] It could also be said that the King is not necessarily a negative character because he is absent. However, an absent King leaving his kingdom in anarchy is difficult to see as a good king. In any case, the criticism of these films is aimed at the arbitrariness of the local lords or *seigneurs* and the lack of a rational, centralised system of government – implicitly ruled by the King.

3.2.3 'Ils sont ce que nous sommes encore la nuit': *La Passion Béatrice*

Tavernier's *La Passion Béatrice* constructs one of the most brutal and grim medieval worlds the cinema has to offer. Although the film is based on the Cenci-story (see supra, 2.2.3, p. 67) it makes three important alterations which greatly change the traditional meaning of the story.[30] First, the time and location of the events were replaced from sixteenth-century Italy to fourteenth-century France and the name Cenci was changed into De Cortemare. Second, unlike the tradition, the film omits many secondary characters and essentially focuses on the relation between the father François De Cortemare, whose role in the story has been greatly emphasised, and his daughter Béatrice. Third, the film stops just after Béatrice killed her father, thereby leaving little room to reflect on the guilt, torture or execution of Béatrice. For now, we will discuss the first two differences which allows us to answer the question how the feudal world in this film is constructed. The third difference, on Béatrice's guilt, will be discussed later in this chapter (see infra, 3.3.2a).

First, we address the question of the significant change in meaning by relocating the Cenci-story from sixteenth-century Italy to fourteenth-century France. This not only allowed Tavernier to transcend the historical limitations of what exactly happened in La Petrella de Salto in 1598 but also gave the story a lot more scope. It was not his intention to make *La Passion Béatrice* into a faithful remedialisation of the known historical facts into film. Conform the medievalist tradition, the Middle Ages in Tavernier's film serve as a 'space for reflection' where the more fundamental or abstract issues related to Western culture or society can be projected on. In the reading we offer on *La Passion Béatrice*, the film is a study on the corrupting effects of unbridled and unchecked power on the soul of man. From this perspective, Harty (1999: 390) compared the 'dark primal forces' at work in this film to be similar to the Greek tragedy. Tavernier opens his film with the projection of the following text:

> "La Passion Béatrice" est un film d'émotion plus qu'une œuvre psychologique. Les personnages n'y sont guidés que par leurs pulsions intérieures. Leurs univers est à la fois vaste et féroce, hanté par les puissances de l'Au-delà, un univers où le Sacré côtoie la

[30] The story of the Cenci murder gripped the imagination of contemporary Rome, but only truly became legendary when Ludovico Antonio Muratori wrote his version of the story in his popular *Annali d'Italia* (1740). It is said that from this book Percy Bysshe Shelley took notice of the story which inspired him to write his influential drama version *The Cenci. A Tragedy in Five Acts* (1819). The Cenci story further inspired many artists, as for example Stendhal's *Les Cenci* (1839), Dumas' *Les Cenci* (1840), Dickens' *Pictures from Italy* (1846) or Hawthorne's *The Marble Faun* (1860) to retell the story (Dempsey, 2012; Fryd, 2006; Borowitz, 2005; Blanks, 2005: 50; Nicholl, 1998; Blood, 1994; Mathews, 1984; Barnett, 1980; Hoeveler, 1979; Hall, 1970; Mastrangelo, 1967). Also the cinema took notice of the Cenci story with *Béatrice Cenci* (Caserini 1909) and two later versions *Castle of the Banned Lovers* (Freda 1956) and *Béatrice Cenci* (Fulci 1969). Both films, however, are set in sixteenth-century Italy. The portrait of Guido Reni is also visible in David Lynch's *Mulholland Drive* (2001), for a discussion see Polláková (2011: 391-393).

> Barbarie. Ce sont des êtres nus, possédés, trop secoués par les Forces de Bien et du Mal pour percevoir les demi-teintes, les clairs-obscurs. Ce sont des enfants sauvages. Ils sont ce que nous sommes encore la nuit, dans nos songes. Ils sont notre inconscient.

For Tavernier, *truth* in historical films is not about looking for accuracy or period detail, but all about 'retrouver le sentiment' of a certain period (Tavernier in Chevrier, 2011: 29, see also Hay, 2000: 30-31). Central in his films are how the people lived, felt and acted in interaction with their environment or their given social-economical and political context, or in other words 'tout ce qui conditionne, éclaire et explique leurs élans de cœur' (Bion, 1984: 10). Not coincidentally Tavernier is known as a political filmmaker and is considered to be the embodiment of the 'altered political and social consciousness that emerged in French film in the wake of May 68' who, as a cineaste, 'resolutely pursued the critique of social institutions' and power (Greene, 1991: 989; see also Chevrier, 2011: 25; Parizot, 2011/2: 47; Hay, 2000: 13-24). This political approach was early on visible in his first four films: *L'horloger de St. Paul* (1973), *Que la fête commence* (1975), *Le juge et l'assassin* (1976) and *Des enfants gâtées* (1977). From the eighties onwards, Tavernier's films became increasingly darker, as for example *Death Watch* (1979) or *Coup de torchon* (1981) that were marked by 'a black and despairing view of human nature and society' (Greene, 1991: 991-997). However, with *La Passion Béatrice* (1987) Tavernier made his darkest film that in the words of Greene (1991: 997) explored a 'still deeper, and blacker, moral abyss'. Where Tavernier is often quoted by having said 'filmer l'Histoire, c'est d'abord rêver', *La Passion Béatrice* has been called a downright nightmare (Nacache, 1987: 30).

The medieval world of *La Passion Béatrice* focuses on the patriarchal, absolute and tyrannical rule of François de Cortemare over his family, his household, and his lands. His own person has become the incarnation of power in a feudal society which lacks any form of counterbalance. Everything and everybody is at his disposal to do as he pleases. When he stops eating, everybody has to stop eating. The villagers are there to be plundered and sacked for his and his fellow spoilers' entertainment. Women in his view are not even to be treated as human beings. Tavernier brought a lot of misogyny to the story that is not to be found in the Cenci story, which reinforces the dark medieval world. The most gruesome example of this is when François and his son return from captivity and meet a woman who had just given birth and killed her baby. On the *bright* side, it was only a girl which meant it was no real loss and did not need to be buried as women have no soul (see infra, 4.1.1, p. 141). In addition, the woman is thrown on the horse of Arnaud to be brought back to the castle and reassured by François that no-one will harm her, as she is his 'possession'. Not much later, however, he tries to rape her while she is still sick and recovering.

Tavernier's film seems to offer an implicit critique on this patriarchal model by on different occasions blurring the gender-roles or differences. The old man in the castle, for example, is no longer considered to be a man by the women of the

household. According to Manter's (2009: 27) psychoanalytical reading, this happens not coincidentally when he fails to cut a chicken with a knife. However, the gender-reversal is most clear in the case of Béatrice and her brother Arnaud. In the film, Arnaud is portrayed as being too soft, too feminine, too young to go to war which makes him cry in his sleep and not even worth the price of a man as ransom. Béatrice, on the other hand, is considered to be the son her father always wanted. She runs around in the woods, behaves as a boy and does not sit sewing 'comme il sied à une demoiselle' according to her mother. She also takes care of the affairs of the castle, selling some of the land in order to pay for her father's ransom. For Manter, who read the film from the perspective of queer theory, the film essentially is a 'critical examination of the insalubrious roots of the modern conception of the heteronormative family' still comparable to the 'perversity of the gendered familial roles handed down to young François' (Manter, 2009: 19). It shows an absurd age, where the patriarchal power is used to destroy that what the father should protect, namely his own family. The film shows how François tries to force reality according to his own will. The son, who he thinks of as a daughter, is fitted with a pink dress and used as human quarry for the hunt after which he is to be raped by women. Béatrice, on the other hand, is to be caged just as the little birds she used to cage, a symbol that was also used in *Pope Joan* as a metaphor for patriarchal society. Again, this echoes Tavernier's interest in showing the difference between expectations and reality. As Béatrice at the beginning of the film is longing for her absent father, who was never absent in the Cenci story, her image of him is cruelly shattered by her father's behaviour when he indeed arrives.

Compared to the tradition on his historical counterpart Francesco Cenci, François de Cortemare is a more elaborate character in the film. In the film we follow him from his youth till his death which allows us to understand or at least to see how he became an infamous tyrant. His role, as this fictionalised background story on François de Cortemare attests, is far more important than in the tradition. It shows us how he was conditioned from childhood on and was confronted with extreme circumstances. Béatrice tells the story of how she imagined her father waiting for her grandfather on the tower of the castle, 'si petit, si blessé, si terriblement seul'. When a priest finally arrives to inform him that his father has been killed, this again upsets the young François greatly. He directs his anger towards God while he points his father's dagger to the sky and says 'Mon Seigneur Dieu, je Vous hais'. When the adult François de Cortemare finally returns from the war and makes his entrance in the film, his disappointment in life has only greatly increased. When people ask him to tell his 'faits d'armes' of the war, he can only tell how he never even managed to hurt an Englishmen let alone kill one. All he did was ride over his own troops to save his life and flee from the battlefield (see infra, 5.2.2.b, pp. 235-237).

Typical of Tavernier's films we see how his characters are 'moulded both by their physical environment and their era' (Hay, 2000: 122-124). At first sight François de Cortemare seems to be a 'monstre de virilité dévoyée' (De Baecque, 1987: 52), but despite the fact that he appears to be the incarnation of evil, his character is perhaps best seen as *human*. And just because of his human nature he cannot cope with the brutal circumstances of the medieval period. As Manter (2009: 29) wrote 'his brooding violence stems from his own disillusionment with this system, which promises him absolute dominion but, in the end, offers only isolation and disappointment'. Throughout the story we see him looking for the love and acceptance of Béatrice, and even begging for the benediction of the anchoress of the village, but he is unable to realise this. He is on a self-destructive quest for meaning in life, to which at one point he tries to defy and provoke God by raping his own daughter in front of the wooden statue of Mary. While historically there is no clear indication that this rape actually took place (Ricci, 1926: 257-266), it became a fundamental aspect in the tradition on Béatrice Cenci. Yet, unlike Shelley's play and the subsequent tradition on Béatrice Cenci in which the incest was the 'controlling symbol' (Groseclose, 1985: 222; see also Potkay, 2004), the rape in *La Passion Béatrice* is the culmination of François de Cortemare's anger. At this point Jehan, the mentally handicapped boy who has nonetheless an acute sense of what is going on, symbolically flees the castle. From then on, Béatrice starts to revolt against her father, while he lives in his self-constructed hell. Francois de Cortemare is not only Bluebeard or Gilles de Rais, but also includes some aspects of Don Juan, making him a much more complex character (Hay, 2000: 127; Pouillade, 1987: 69). He is not a simple monster who denies God's existence or influence, but struggles heavily against Him. In a way he is comparable to Antonius Block from *The Seventh Seal*, who was in a way also a lost soul looking for meaning in life. But contrary to Block who eventually found meaning in life, François de Cortemare's quest for meaning only results in more ennui and emptiness.

The cinematography of Bruno de Keyzer and decorator Guy-Claude François attributed greatly in offering an expressive visual translation of this medieval world. This imbalanced medieval world is reflected in the camera-work which uses a lot of high and low angels instead of the classical straight-on angle, thereby offering an expressive visual translation. Rather than being an exact copy of how the Middle Ages looked like, the rocky, barren and wind-swept landscapes in the film add to the sense of isolation and hardship that reflects the emotional balance of the characters in the film. The characters are rarely shown in close-up, but rather from a distance so that they seem lost in the frame, again as a reflection of their state of mind. Also the lightning emphasises the state of mind and the emotional expressiveness of the characters (Hay, 2000: 125-126; Vigo, 1987: 4; Rabinovici, 1987: 6).

An important aspect of François de Cortemare's self-destructive quest for meaning in life, is the fact that he as lord of his castle, has unbridled power over everyone and everybody. *La Passion Béatrice* demonstrates the frailty or weakness of human nature which, when given unbridled power, will corrupt the will. It is as if Tavernier returns to the Middle Ages to show us a pure example of what unbridled power, characteristic of a medieval feudal context, does to the soul of men. What Tavernier offers us is what he calls 'l'homme nu'. He wants to get inside the soul of François de Cortemare and understand how he is shaped by the environment and period. It is not necessarily institutionalised madness (see e.g. Tavernier's *Le juge et l'assassin*, 1976), but unpunished madness. François de Cortemare is the result of the non-existence of a state-apparatus who could counter him. In that way, the story of François de Cortemare is more than only about a man, but an example of human nature or what we may become ourselves when put in a similar context. It is clearly shown in the film that also Arnaud, although his father does not hides his contempt for him, is in fact looking up to his father. For example, when Arnaud calls out that women have no soul when they meet with the woman who just gave birth in the snow, he looks for his father for approval. Or when he calls all women to be 'trollops and witches' when Béatrice was confined in the tower, his mother clearly says that it are his father's words who got stuck in his throat. In other words, the medieval context is also conditioning Arnaud. It is an inherently pessimistic film about human nature. From this perspective the recurring theme and importance of children in the oeuvre of Tavernier (Bion, 1984: 11-21) is significant in *La Passion Béatrice*. The story of young François de Cortemare and how he became the patriarch is explained by a voice-over from Tavernier himself (Hay, 2000: 122) at the beginning of the film:

> Il est des histoires comme de certains arbres, dont il est nécessaire de connaître la racine pour mieux saisir la maladive contorsion des branches, l'afflux de sang dans le feuillage, le poison dans la sève. François de Cortemare n'avait alors que dix ans, et son père partait à la guerre.

We see the impact of the environment, or how the poison comes from the roots into the leaves where it becomes visible. Feudal society is as strong as its leader, and with a pessimistic vision on mankind, the medieval is doomed by arbitrariness and its consequent violence. This is also emphasised by the other children in the film who are the first victims in this medieval world which, may in fact form the strongest accusation against this milieu. The mentally handicapped boy Jehan is forced to eat dirt and gets hurt. The two young boys who have no future at the castle are caught when they tried to flee and were hung from a tree. It is a truly grim and dark world where, following the metaphor of the tree where the poison is in the sap, the children either become tainted or corrupted by their environment. It is in this world in which Béatrice gets stuck. And because of the incestuous rape, she cannot be married to

Lamartine which would have been a legitimate way out. The only way out for Béatrice, is killing her father. This issue will be addressed later on.

3.2.4 Feudal Law in *The Advocate*

> 'Sir Lancelot, according to the law, the penalty for you and Guinevere the Queen is death. But by my authority as sovereign lord of this realm neither the Queen nor you shall die.'
> King Arthur in *Knights of the Round Table*, Thorpe 1953.

> 'Those who seek justice, fall prey to it.'
> The father of the accused woman, *The Reckoning,* McGuigan 2002.

In the idealised chivalric world of *The Knights of the Round Table* the King's verdict is more just or humane than the cold mechanics of the law. It is his wise judgement that spares Lancelot from death, which would be considered too harsh for the human weakness in Lancelot's character. In other words, the law, although not necessarily an unjust verdict, is corrected or made more humane by a wise King. In the feudal Dark Ages, however, the law is also subject to the will of the local lord, but in a negative way. For example in *The Reckoning*, when the sheriff comes to arrest the players because they threaten to reveal the lord's crimes, the sheriff refers to the lord as him 'from whom this court draws the power to dispense justice according to the laws of the land'. The law or the judiciary is not an independent institution, but a tool in the hands of one man who can use it as he wishes. Also in the historical debates on the French Revolution, the issue of the 'seigneurial justice' was considered to be one of the elements that caused a lot of discontent (Reynolds, 1994: 3-5; Mackrell, 1973: 123-144).

In the abovementioned films, the feudal lords essentially ruled by means of force. They can whip, imprison or execute anyone at will without a trial in order to enforce their will and stay in control. In this section we will focus on feudal law based on *The Advocate*. In this film, although there are laws, courts and trials, it is demonstrated how these were nothing more than an alternative tool for the elite to maintain control. By using an irrational, obscure and biased system of law, the lord and his elite upheld order in the village of Abbeville.

The elite in *The Advocate* consists of the local seigneur Jehan d'Auferre, the village priest Albertus, the country lawyer Pincheon and the magistrate Boniface. Contrary to the representation of the elite in other films, these people are educated and rational. But unlike city lawyer Richard Courtois, the protagonist of the film, they use their abilities to maintain their own comfortable position in society. Two other

things distinguish seigneur Jehan d'Auferre from the count de Villars, François de Cortemare and lord De Guise. First, he is not a member of hereditary nobility. As a successful businessman he had amassed a large fortune and bought himself a piece of land – and the title that came with it. From this perspective he is comparable to the Burgomaster in *The Pied Piper*, also a representative of the rising third estate. Jehan d'Aufferre is a man who thinks everything can be bought with money which allows him to have a decadent lifestyle. Not only does he give exotic and erotic decadent banquets, he also likes to hunt human quarry, for which he pays royally of course. He even bought a special dispensation from the pope to marry his brother's wife – the way his brother died remains curiously unanswered. According to Woods (2002: 76) his name is derived from the Latin 'auferre', meaning 'to remove' or 'to take', even 'to seduce' or 'to steal'. He is the offspring of a Cathar grandfather who had 'his legs burnt off by King Phillip', referring to King Philip II Augustus (1165-1223) under whose reign the crusade against the Albigensians commenced. The Cathars as they are depicted in *The Advocate*, despite their mysterious clothing and rituals, are an economic organisation aimed to set the prices throughout their lands in order to maximise their profits. As we can hear them say that they 'can't ask more from the town', this implies that they squeeze and exploit the local people as much as they possibly can. Although popular culture usually portrays the Cathars in a positive way (McCaffrey, 2001: 126; for Catharism in films, see De la Bretèque, 2004: 664-668), here they are depicted as an obscure, elitist and powerful cartel.

D'Aufferre's great fortune also enabled him to buy the local magistrate and lawyer who will now do whatever he asks of them. His absolute power on Abbeville is not directly based on the strength of arms, but is based on him controlling the judiciary. And just as he once bought the local lawyer Pincheon, at the end of the film he tries to buy the new lawyer Courtois. When Courtois is not willing to comply with this scheme and wants to remain independent from the seigneur, he is threatened with random accusations that could get him executed. The local law of Abbeville is so complex and impenetrable that it allows the lord, by means of his lawyer, to prosecute whoever he wants. The role of the sheriff in the film, although present, is therefore not as important as it is in other films. As the introductory statement of the film goes:

> The local Lords, the Seigneurs, ruled with self-interest, and justice was represented by a somewhat confused legal profession. Each region had its own laws, but all had one extraordinary provision… Animals were subject to the same civil laws as human beings. They could be prosecuted for crimes, and tried in a court of law. Unbelievable as it may seem, all cases in this film are based on historical fact.

It is this judiciary system which forms the nexus of conflict in the film. We will discuss two different aspects of the medieval world of *The Advocate*. We will focus on a system which is to our modern standards completely unreasonable, symbolised in the

existing practice of animal and witch trials. Next, it also shows how the medieval lords made use of this absurd law to enforce their own will. As the local priest Albertus summarised to Courtois in the film: 'in a world where nothing is reasonable, in the end nothing can be truly mad'.

a) 'In a world where nothing is reasonable…'

The idea of the director Megahey to make a film on the judiciary system during the Middle Ages came from a book that was sent by a friend.

> A few years ago, a friend sent me a book about the prosecution of animals in the Middle Ages… These trials read like modern courtroom dramas. Since the animals were given a full defense counsel and were prosecuted with the whole rigor of the law, it had all the kind of little tricks that lawyers play to get their clients off. What really intrigued me was reading up about [the] people – the renegade priests, the philosophers, the lawyers, people who actually had very modern ideas. (Megahey, in Berardinelli, s.d.)

The book that Megahey is referring to is E.P. Evans' *The Criminal Prosecution and Capital Punishment of Animals. The Lost History of Europe's Animal Trials,* first published in 1906. In this book, he discovered the career of a lawyer called Bartholomew Chassenée (1480 - ?), who became the inspiration for the character of Richard Courtois. The trials in the film are based on examples that can be found in the historical career of Chassenée. The summoning of the rats to testify in court, for example, was based on a historical trial before the ecclesiastical court of Autun where rats were accused of 'having feloniously eaten up and wantonly destroyed the barley-crop of that province' (Evans, 1987: 18-19). The legal and technical manoeuvre of calling rats as witnesses resulted in a full acquittal, both for Chassenée as well as for Courtois in the film. The film also includes evidence from other animal trials than only those by Chassenée. In the main case of the film, the 'The State of Ponthieu vs. the Porker', where a pig is accused of having killed a Jewish boy, the film uses fragments of several of the thirty-four documented pig trials that can be found in Evans. For example, during the trial Pincheon accuses the pig not only of killing the child, but also of eating a portion of its body 'although it was Friday!'. This is an aggravating condition because 'the consumption of flesh' on such a day is 'contrary to Christian ordinance of *jejunum sextae'*. This segment of the film was based on a case where a pig was hanged in 1394 in Mortaign on the charge of…

> …having sacrilegiously eaten a consecrated wafer; and in a case of infanticide, it is expressly stated in the plaintiff's declaration that the pig killed the child and ate of its flesh, "although it was Friday," and this violation of the *jejunium sextae*, prescribed by the Church, was urged by the prosecuting attorney and accepted by the court as a serious aggravation of the porker's offence. (Evans, 1987: 156-157)

Despite the historical references, the film was criticised for how it represented the history of animal trials. Strick (1994: 53), a reviewer from *Sight and Sound*, wrote it was not the intention of the film to make the issue of animal trials understandable to a modern audience. In a review in the *American Historical Review*, Mitchell (1995: 1222) even went a step further claiming that 'its view of the medieval world is both ahistorical and mean spirited'. Both reviewers claimed that the history of the animal trials was only being used as an alienating device to a modern audience. In the film, the lord exploits the credulity of the people which allows him to shift the blame to animals. Essentially these animal trials serve as a cover-up in order to protect the real culprit of the crimes committed, who happens to be the son of the lord.

In the opening scene of *The Advocate*, for example, where a man and a donkey are to be hanged for having 'carnal knowledge' of each other, aims at characterising the Middle Ages as a Dark Age. Only seconds before the actual hanging, a petition is brought forward which clears the donkey of its guilt. The crowd cheers, while the man is left to be hung. This opening scene is clearly aimed at anchoring the viewers in an age that certainly is not theirs, despite the fact that this scene was also based on a historical example:

> In the case of Jacques Ferron, who was taken in the act of coition with a she-ass at Vanvres in 1750, and after due process of law, sentenced to death, the animal was acquitted on the ground that she was the victim of violence and had not participated in her master's crime of her own free will. The prior of the convent, who also performed the duties of parish priest, and the principal inhabitants of the commune of Vanvres signed a certificate stating that they had known the said she-ass for four years, and that she had always shown herself to be virtuous and well-behaved both at home and abroad and had never given occasion of scandal to any one, and that therefore "they were willing to bear witness that she was in word and in deed and in all her habits of life a most honest creature." (Evans, 1987: 150)

The meaning of these trials is different in the film for two reasons. First, by showing it as an event in Abbeville in 1452, it implies to be a medieval event while the actual facts took place in 1750, only forty years before the French Revolution. Animal trials (or witch trials for that matter, see infra, 4.2) are not inherent to the Middle Ages, but are mainly a early-modern phenomenon (Humphrey, 1987: xxiv; Hyde, 1916). Most evidence of animals trials is found from the late Middle Ages till the eighteenth century in an area that now covers France, Italy, Switzerland, Germany and Belgium (Srivastava, 2007; Beirne, 1994: 28; Monballyu, 1982: 173-175).

Second, by presenting this specific event as the opening scene it presents this kind of executions as the general norm. None of characters on screen seem to be amazed at what is happening before their eyes while the execution of the donkey in Vanvres in 1750 was for Evans (1987: 151) nothing less than 'unique in the annals of criminal prosecutions'. The reason why some societies went through all the effort to put animals to trial remains somewhat of a conundrum to the present day. It may

have been an official way of eliminating a threat, comparable to putting a wild dog to sleep before he can do more damage. Another theory considers these trials as the long-term effect of the Germanic law that stated that every damage, no matter what or how, had to be avenged. These trials could also serve to frighten human criminals. If even pigs have to suffer for their crimes, then humans can rest assured that if they commit a crime, they will certainly be punished. From this perspective, animal trials can be seen as a sort of morality play. Another theory stated that these trials could also serve from a political perspective as a way to restore the peace by erasing all the memories of the animal that had done something wrong. Even if animal behaviour could not be explained, defining it as a 'crime' could establish cognitive control (Humphrey, 1987). Finally there was also a theological theory. When Thomas Aquinas stated that everything is subject to God's Law that 'held sway over the entire universe', than everything had to be accountable for the crimes they committed. From this view we get an insight in how man saw himself in the universal scheme. Thomas Aquinas did however make some fine distinctions which were later lost by authors who held everything equally accountable for the law (Cohen, 1986: 35-36).[31] Robertshaw (2007: 257) also added to this entire debate that lawyers perhaps were not so eager to abolish these kinds of trials because they got paid for this kind of procedures. In other words, as long as they got paid, they would take them as seriously as possible.

Next to the animal trials, *The Advocate* continues to alienate medieval law from a modern perspective by including institutionalised anti-Semitism. The judiciary in the film becomes even more absurd when a capable apothecary-surgeon with a valuable testimony is not allowed to witness in court because he is a Jew. Pigs and rats may testify in the courts of Ponthieu, but Jews may not. In fact, Jews in the town of Abbeville have to wear distinctive marks on their clothing to make it visible that they are Jews. This anti-Semitism can also be found in the book by Evans. It clearly stated that 'coition with a Jewess is precisely the same as if a man should copulate with a dog'. This is exemplified with the case of a certain Johannes Alardus or Jean Alard who 'kept a Jewess in his house' and had several children with her. He was burned at the stake with his wife. The same held true for Turks and Saracens 'inasmuch as such persons in the eye of the law and our holy faith differ in no wise from beasts' (Evans, 1987: 152-153). The village people show yet another distinct feature of the Dark Ages: intolerance. Also the gypsies who arrive in the village are violently shunned away by the villagers and the guards. They are baptised by water and lime against their will, under the false pretence of cleansing them of the plague.

[31] This more religious perspective also came close to the debates on demon-trials in which the animal had to be exorcised (Monballyu, 1982: 174). This perspective is also visible in the film, however historically an ecclesiastical court was not competent 'in cause sanguinis', or when blood had been shed (Evans, 1987: 31).

b) '... nothing can be truly mad'

We argue that the film is a divide and a confrontation between the rational lawyer Courtois and the feudal lawyer Pincheon, who both have a very different view on the law. On the one hand there is Courtois, the rational and enlightened protagonist of the film. In his plea against animal trials he makes his point from a very modern sounding rational position. In the film he quotes from the first book of the Pandects (Roman Law):

> 'No animal that lacks intelligence, reasoning, *quod sensu caret* can be said to have wilfully caused injury' and he continues that 'justice is like nature which, the philosophers affirm, can do nothing in vain. *Nihil operantur frustra*. Now I ask you, can anything be more futile than to summons a brute beast into this solemn assembly to sit in judgement upon it? The criminal charge may only be brought against one capable of entering into a covenant. You cannot summon a six-year-old child, nor a lunatic! How can one, then, possibly arraign a dumb animal?'

Courtois is an adept of clear, rational Roman law, and uses a modern discourse referring to concepts as the 'object of desire', 'right of testimony', 'witnesses' and expects a verdict from the 'capable hands of the jury'. Roman law is something impartial, coded, abstract, structural, independent from culture, language or the colour of one's skin and ethnicity. The law is a philosophy, made of rational and abstract thought and is not a tool in the hands of the lords. When Courtois visits and interrogates the so-called witch, he immediately disregards all absurd nonsense she tells him. For example, she claims to have suckled Lucifer. Courtois investigates her in a very modern sounding way by detecting 'second and third degree' torture marks and then prepares her case as rationally as possible. Later in the film he will do the same for the gypsies. Instead of looking at them as devils, infidels or heretics, he treats them as human beings and defends them to the best of his abilities. His ideal of justice will in the end even bring him to prosecute the son of the lord, even if it takes him twenty years of his life. Not coincidentally, the woman accused of witchcraft says to Courtois: 'There is *darkness* all about you. You can bring the *light*!', using a metaphor that opposes the Dark Ages to Enlightenment.

In fact, also Evans in his book on animal trials was using these trials to confront them with the more civilised world in which he lived:

> If we compare these barbarities with the law recently enacted by the legislature of the state of New York, whereby capital punishment is to be inflicted as quickly and painlessly as possible by means of electricity, we shall be able to appreciate the immense difference between the mediaeval and the modern spirit in the conception of execution of penal justice (Evans, 1987: 210)

Evans can be seen as a late example of nineteenth-century cultural positivism in which he, as a modern man, considered his own age to be far superior compared with the 'legacy of [a] primitive, superstitious past' (Cohen, 1986: 16). Nobody in modern society would seriously believe 'that animals are capable of intending to commit crime' (Evans, 1987: 29 & 43). In addition, justice had not only become more enlightened, but also more humane: 'Have not the rack and the gibbet been displaced by the clinically painless euthanasia dispensed by lethal injections and vacuum chambers?' (Beirne, 1994: 44).[32]

Courtois	**Pincheon**
Roman Law	Ponthieu Law
General principles	Local practices
Fair trial	Prerogatives
Accountability	Eye for an eye
Justice	Control
City	Countryside
Modernity	Dark Ages

Where Courtois can be seen as a representative of modern and enlightened law, Maitre Pincheon in *The Advocate* is the spokesmen of medieval law. The most important objective of the law for Pincheon is that it must bring control and order in society. Every act of violence, be it from an animal or a human being is to be punished, in a way 'to control or be controlled' (Woods, 2002: 66-68). As Pincheon says 'murder is murder. Whether it be committed by a half-witted man or a pig of prodigious learning'. In a speech he defends his position:

> Gentlemen, any man's death is terrible, inexplicable. The death of a child, even a Hebrew child, maitre, more so. It causes us to question the natural law, to ponder in our anguish the purposes of God himself. Where is order .. and rule? And what do we do when faced with the unknown and the unknowable? We give ourselves up to fear! Every day, every one of us awaits in terror, some new chaos, some new darkness. It is the curse of our times, gentlemen. Not the Black death, but fear, so much the blacker. And what, aside from our prayers, can help us to bear this burden? I would say to you: The Law! The law is not only punishment and retribution. The law can purge the deed, put an end to the chapter, close the book! When we see justice done, we go back to our daily lives knowing at least that the next time the fears come they will be subject to the same immutable process. A child is dead. Killing the pig won't bring it back. But it will, for the rest of us say: it is done this time, and properly done. For now the circle is full again. Complete.

However, as his services were bought by seigneur D'Aufferre, Pincheon is also linked to the elite. At the end of the film he even admits to Courtois that once he loved rational law, but adds: 'It's pearls to swine, you know. That's what they are, these poor country folk. Suspicious, superstitious, selfish, lubricious, salt of the earth, scum

[32] This reviewer of Evans' book did also consider the events in the book to be purely medieval and replaced the original title 'The Criminal Prosecution [...]' into 'The *Medieval* Prosecution [...]' (Beirne, 1994: 43, italics mine).

of the earth'. Not only does Pincheon look down on the people, one can expect that he is knowingly defending the pig as a cover for the crimes of the son of the lord. Now he no longer stands for rational law as he is serving in a system where only rule and order is the ultimate goal. When D'Auferre was trying to buy the services of Courtois, he says to him: 'You know, maitre, there are things that a country lawyer just has to do. So why don't you say your peace, pick up the money and let them hang the beast. It's only a pig.' And similar to the village priest, Pincheon acknowledges the wishes of his patron which allows him to have a comfortable life.

At first sight, it would appear that Courtois is modernity's answer to the medieval. His inspiring, rational and logical introduction of the law, by which he easily wins his first case of 'The State of Ponthieu versus Claude Vollier' offers hope to bring justice instead of order to Abbeville. Also in the second case, in which he defends Jeannine who is accused of witchcraft, he succeeds in getting a good arrangement for her in the civil court. And in the end, he also wins the case of 'The State of Ponthieu versus the Porker' winning the pig back for the gypsies he defends. Then he is fed up and goes to the place where he belongs, the city. As the credits at the end of the film inform the viewer, there he went on representing mainly two-legged clients. The city may be characterised by politics, but not by absurdities. Many critics focussed on this aspect and looked on Courtois as 'more Perry Mason than medieval' (Ebert, 1994) or as 'a Renaissance man trapped in a waning medieval era' (Hinson, 1994). The presentist meaning of these historical events as shown in the film was therefore interpreted by Floyd (1993: 22) as a way to 'examine the decidedly contemporary issues of intolerance and abuse of power', although not specifying what contemporary issues he was referring to.

However, it could equally be argued that Courtois did not win over the medieval, but on the contrary, that he lost against it. Woods (2002: 68-69), for example, already contested the idea that Courtois was a 'Renaissance man, to save this or any other world. He ultimately returns to an urban version of the same problems, concerned, like any other man, with 'making a living''. During the film, despite his victories, we witness how Courtois is defeated by the medieval world.

During the first trial, he displays an excellent knowledge of the (Roman) law and wins the trial relatively easily. Just after his victory, however, he realises that his client was guilty all along. During the witch-trial, he mobilises all his wits and exploits the absurdities of the local law and by a literal and perhaps absurd, yet still rational, reading of law which brings him to summon rats as witnesses. Again he succeeds in getting a favourable arrangement in the civic court for the witch. However, this victory is quite literally short-lived as he is immediately confronted with the dark reality of medieval law as the civil court, from one moment to the next, becomes an ecclesiastical court (existing of the same people minus Courtois) that condemns the witch to death due to earlier confessions she made to that court. In other words, there

is no separation of Church and State which means that the lord has more than one court he can control. It is at that point, when the condemned witch is led out of the courtroom she tells Courtois that he can bring the light. Also, just before she is to be hanged, she does not curse the town for the injustice that is done to her, but strangely enough blesses it:

> I will not curse this town but I will leave it with a blessing. These are bad times and there'll be more before your day of deliverance. Then I see there will come a fine knight in armor that shines like the sun and he will carry the weapons of strength and righteousness. And he'll deliver you from your lying and your evil and make this a fit place for all of you.

When Maria, the maid in the inn where Courtois stays, is telling the story of the hanging to Courtois, she explicitly tells that Courtois might be that fine knight in armor that shines like the sun. In this reading it would appear that Courtois' enlightened rationality and concept of the law is what this medieval society needs in order to become a place fit for all. However, instead of carrying on, Courtois gives in. He realises that there is a law for the elite, and a law for the people and decides that he does not belong in the village of Abbeville. During the third trial of 'The State of Ponthieu vs. the Porker', Courtois is no longer the same lawyer as he was at the beginning. He now understands that rationality in a medieval world is useless and decides to give in and play along in the medieval logic. For example, during the trial of the witch he already mockingly, but strategically, made use of the local law to summon rats to testify in court in order to 'delay and confuse'. In his final trial he is really playing the game by forging evidence and producing a fake pork to take the blame. Although it is impossible to overturn the legal system of the state of Ponthieu, Courtois does succeed in obtaining justice for the gypsies by lying in court.

The parallel is drawn to Pincheon, who was once a lawyer from Paris just as Courtois. Contrary to Courtois however, Pincheon did settle in Abbeville, joined the side of the seigneur and adapted himself to the local laws and customs. As Courtois on the other hand is only interested in true justice, regardless of those concerned, he cannot stay in Abbeville and leaves before the medieval system would encapsulate or eliminate him. As Pincheon says to Courtois: 'Go back to the city where you belong. Don't grow old and tired in a place like this'. Despite the enlightened rationality of Courtois, he will not be the fine knight in armor that shines like the sun. In order to overturn the medieval world of Ponthieu, a disaster of apocalyptical dimensions will be needed: the Black Death (see chapter 5.1.2b).

3.2.5 Clerical Feudalism

> L'Eglise, complice des grands, asservit et abrutit les peoples: elle laisse, sans protester, s'exercer pendant des siècles cet infâme droit du seigneur qu'on ose à peine nommer dans une société honnête, elle ne s'indigne même pas lorsqu'au retour de la chasse, les seigneurs font ouvrir le ventre de leurs manants pour y prendre un bain de pieds chaud.
>
> G. Kurth, *Qu'est ce que le Moyen Âge*, 18--, p. 12.

> 'And now that I saw her in the midst of her poverty and squalor I praised God in my heart that I was a Franciscan. I wanted her to know that I did not belong to this rapacious abbey but to an order dedicated to lifting her people out of their physical destitution and spiritual deprivation.'
>
> Adso of Melk, in *The Name of the Rose*, Annaud 1986.

The feudal divide in films on the Dark Ages is not restricted to the relation between the lords and their people, as also the Church is often presented as a power institute that demands more from its flock than only prayers. The Church can be seen as part of the feudal elite, either as the accomplice of the local lord (*The Advocate*, *The Reckoning* and *Anazapta*), or as a feudal usurper in its own right (*The Name of the Rose*, *Pope Joan*, *Black Death* and *Anazapta*). However, as a preliminary remark, the divide between a feudal Church and a dogmatic Church which we will discuss in the next chapter, is sometimes an artificial divide made for analysis' sake only.

First, there are members of the clergy who function as an accomplice to their lord. Essentially, they protect the lord's position in order to protect their own privileged position in society. A clear example of this is father Albertus in *The Advocate*, who will say anything seigneur Jehan d'Aufferre wants him to, even if he knows it is not the truth. Albertus is an educated, rational and enlightened man, but has nonetheless chosen to use his abilities for his own good. He has studied extensively at different universities and is delighted when Courtois arrives in town, as 'everyone who has read a book has been sent from the almighty'. Still, although he knows about the crimes of his lord, he prefers to keep his silence in order to maintain his nice and quiet life in the village. When Courtois asks Albertus to speak out in court his answer is plain and simple: 'Richard, I like it here. It's a very nice living. Having my balls burnt off in public might take some of the pleasure out of it.' Other examples of clergymen as an accomplice to their lord is father Damian in *The Reckoning*. It was he who lured the boys and then brought them to lord De Guise to be abused. Remarkably, at the highest chamber of the tower where De Guise spies on his people, there is a heraldic image of a double-headed eagle visible on the wall. In the context of the film this could either refer to De Guise's quasi imperial ambitions, but it could also refer to him as at the head of both State and Church, reminiscent of how this heraldic

emblem was used in the Byzantine Empire. In *Anazapta*, after the wife of the lord confessed to the village priest that she had an adulterous relation, the priest breaks the Sanctity of Confession and informs the lord. Immediately thereafter the lord seeks horrible vengeance by letting the entire village rape his wife. Finally, in *Le moine et la sorcière*, the link between the secular forces and Etienne de Bourbon is also emphasised, as De Bourbon depends on the secular authorities to execute his commands.[33] When he arrives in the village he asks for a list of people suspected of heresy who could undermine the position and authority of the Church. It is his task to 'persuade the guilty to confess and repent so they may receive absolution'. However, the film immediately focuses on one case where he failed in this task and recommended that the heretic be 'destroyed', burnt, in fact, by 'the secular authorities'. De Bourbon also does not interfere in matters of local politics as he says that 'the count's land is his to do with it as he wishes' and can only advise the people to flee and renounce their rights to the land. But when the count recognises De Bourbon as a nobleman's son, he also immediately expects him to join his side and calls De Bourbon a 'traitor' when he refuses to do so.

As a side remark, also Bernardo Gui, the notorious inquisitor from *The Name of the Rose*, is presented as a member of nobility. Not only does he arrive in the same fashion as the papal delegate, he is also addressed by William of Baskerville as 'Lord Gui'. Significantly, Gui is always surrounded by soldiers in the film, as a way to differentiate (and in fact defend) him from the people. Also the papal nuncio in *The Pied Piper* was carried in a closed and barred chariot, escorted by mounted clergymen who kept him safely away from the people. The clothing of these escorting clergyman is referring to the Spanish Inquisition and their staffs are tridents which seem more fit for military use than for praying.

However, where in some films the clergy is only an accomplice to the feudal lords, in other films the Church can be seen as a power institute itself. This is, for example, the case in *Pope Joan*. In Protestant propaganda, the story that once a woman occupied the papal throne was used to undermine the authority of the Church as this would mean that the line of succession from St. Peter until the present was broken (Tinsley, 1987: 381; see also DeMarco, 2008: 63). In *Pope Joan*, however, the religious controversy is underplayed for a more political reading of the story. Being a member of the Church in this film is not seen as something negative, as it is the Bishop at the Scola who gives Johanna a chance to study, or the old monk in Fulda who hid Johanna's true identity and saved her when she was sick. Even Pope Leo II is represented as a good, just and wise Pope. Negatively evaluated in the film are the

[33] Historically, the local lords did agree to his wish of cutting the sacred woods and destroying the bones of the dog (Schmitt, 1929: 17).

characters who only look for their own interests rather than the common good. Two clear examples are King Lothar and Anastasius, the first being a secular King, the second the son of the noble Arsenius and member of an important family at the papal Court. King Lothar is not interested in the well-being of his army, as his captain Gerald does, but is only interested in the power he could exert over Rome. The same holds true for Anastasius who is not interested in the common people, but makes shady deals with rich investors who aim to please the King and the nobles at the expense of the common people. He plans, for example, to demolish some of the poor houses in Rome order to make room for a luxury resting place for royals and rich pilgrims. From the beginning of the film, *Pope Joan* clearly chooses the side of the common people over the achievements of the King and the realm. Charlemagne, for example, was called 'the great' as he was important for those who write history, but from a perspective of the common people, he only brought war and 'the terrible memory of an emperor who fought the heathen faith with fame and sort'.

Perhaps the most striking example and symbol of a feudal Church is the debate held in *The Name of the Rose* between the Franciscan delegates and the Papal delegates on the question if the Church should be poor. Historically this debate, set in Avignon in 1324, was convoked by Pope John XXII as a way to settle the dispute between the newly founded mendicant order of the Franciscans and the Church (for the historical debate, see Woods, 2014: 125; Taussat, 2001: 264-266). On the one side stand the Franciscans, in simple gray garments, with on the other side the well-fed and luxuriously clothed representatives of the Church. The same divide is also visible where it concerns the Franciscans and the Benedictine abbey. The wealth that the Benedictine abbey had gathered throughout time is visible from the moment the abbot first meets William of Baskerville. From the abbot's neck hangs a heavy golden cross, encrusted with jewels, and on his hand he has an equally heavy golden ring which Adso may kiss. From the beginning, the film makes clear that not much of the abbey's wealth is flowing back to the peasants in the valley. Where the monks in the abbey are living of the work of the peasants, all they offer in return is what they will receive in the afterlife: 'For what thou givest on earth, verily shalt you receive a hundred-fold in paradise'. Once in a while, the Church gives something back to the people as they throw what seem to be leftovers but mainly garbage and thrash through a hatch down to the people. When William of Baskerville observes this he sarcastically says: 'Another generous donation by the Church to the poor'. During their lives, however, the peasants have to work, turn in their profits and are badly treated for it. William of Baskerville experiences this bad treatment for himself when he, due to his simple Franciscan clothing, is mistaken for a peasant at the beginning of the film. Later in the film, during the Inquisitional trial, some of the masks fall off as the true intention is revealed. Brother Remigio, coincidentally or not the one who received the donations of the peasants in the former scene, at one point clearly

exclaims: 'For the twelve years I lived here I did nothing but stuff my belly, shag my wick and squeeze the hungry peasants for tithes', after which the montage tellingly cuts to a shot of the abbot as well as the papal delegate.

The debate on the wealth of the Church, theologically framed into the question 'did Christ or did he not own the clothes that he wore', is merely an extension of the feudal situation in the abbey. Significantly, when the papal delegate arrived at the abbey, his cart was being pushed through the mud by the peasants. For Annaud (in Taussat, 2001: 271), this single image reveals how he thought of the Church. During the debate we learn how the Franciscans for example want to give fertile lands back to the people, similar to the situation of Artaud and his family in *Le moine et la sorcière*, but the papal delegate is firmly against it. In his view the Church needs these resources to 'combat unbelievers and wage war on the infidels'. The Church, in other words, is a symbol for a persecuting entity which has been read in a *presentist* context as either Nazi's or Italy's political situation in the eighties (see Haydock, 2008; 32). The money of the Church serves on the one hand for their own luxurious lifestyle, and on the other hand to enforce their position by means of violence. Not coincidentally, the abbey in the film is characterised by a lot of metal gates, bars, and closed doors as a way to protect their wealth as well as to keep forbidden knowledge hidden. The debate, in other words, has been interpreted in modern terms as the divide between capitalism and socialism, where the film clearly takes the side of socialism.

There is a thin line between dogmatism and feudalism, or truly believing in what is said against purely using it for its own gain or a combination of the both. Keeping the status quo can also be used as the main rationale behind the actions of Jorge of Burgos, the old monk who poisoned the pages of Aristotle's book in order to kill its readers. The second book of Aristotle's *Poetics*, on the topic of humour, is dangerous in the eyes of Jorge. Officially he dislikes the book 'because providence doesn't want futile things glorified', but more than a doctrinal reason Jorge fears that this book is dangerous because it could make people doubt the Church. Humour is dangerous because 'laughter kills fear. And without fear, there can be no faith. Because without fear of the devil, there is no more need of God.' The reason why the Church is so dogmatic, which we consider in more detail in the next chapter, has not as much to do with being superstitious, ignorant or fanatic. Is has to do with the fact that the Church does not want to let other ideas endure in order to safeguard their position. The same holds true for Jorge of Burgos who kills in order to keep the system of faith untouched.

Something similar, but far more brutal occurs in *Black Death*, where the rumour goes that one village has not been touched by the plague. As this village is said to be heretical, this might undermine the authority of the Church which stands powerless against the plague. As a way to restore the authority of the Church, the bishop in the film is sending soldiers to the village in order to wipe out its population.

However, apart from this single example of a truly militant Church, the most common used instrument of the Church to keep the people on their side is by spreading fear. Etienne de Bourbon in *Le moine et la sorcière*, for example, preaches fire and brimstone in order to drive the people to the straight faith. Just after he entered the village, he makes a threatening speech to the villagers in which he explains his presence: 'I am here seeking the foxes who want to trick you and gobble you down the jaws of Hell! […] Let me help you name and destroy the evil that can drag you down the gullet of Hell!'. In *The Advocate*, father Albertus, exploits the fear for the devil to let the people, or more specifically the women, do what he wants.

In *The Seventh Seal*, Albertus Pictor is feeding the fear by means of gruesome images he paints on the church wall. As he tells Jöns, when people become frightened, they start to think. And the more they think, the more frightened they get. And in the end, 'they'll run right into the arms of priests'. Later in the film as well, especially the entrance of the flagellants in the village or the burning of the witch are clearly examples of a society in which fear and terror are wide-spread and where the Church, instead of offering hope or relief, is mostly responsible for this. Religion in *The Seventh Seal*, in the words of Holland (1959: 267) equals 'suppression, cruelty, persecution, the burning of innocent girls as witches, the terrifying realism of the crucifixes in the peasant's churches' (Holland, 1959: 267).

Apart from instilling fear, the Church also tries to keep the status quo by reconciling the people with the hard conditions in which they have to live. They realise that life is hard for the simple peasants, but as the Church and the lord are dependent on each other and on the work of the peasants, none of them wants a rebellion. Especially the Church thrives on the fear they install on the people as they might lose their souls in the afterlife. Particularly this afterlife is important as it is the only shred of hope that can be offered to the poor peasants. The opening sermon given by Nicholas at the beginning of *The Reckoning,* in which he reads from Paul's letter to the Romans, can be seen as exemplary:[34]

> Seek those things that are above, not those things that are upon the earth. … Brothers and sisters, everyday I hear a grumbling against God. Times are hard, the times are bad. Grievous times. And that they are. But, let us not forget the words of the Apostle in his letter to the Romans: 'The sufferings of this present time are not to be compared with the future Glory. The glory that shall be revealed in us.' Indeed, brother and sisters, I would go further. I would go further and say that this *life simply has to be harsh, to stop earthly happiness being loved*. It is essential that this life be troubled so that the other life… Right now it is still dark. You cannot see God yet, or hold into your hands all that He has promised you. … But do not despair. Trust in Him. Hope in Him. You will not be disappointed. (*The Reckoning*, italics mine)

[34] At the beginning of the film, Nicholas is still a member of the medieval elite. Remarkably, where his name was Nicholas Barber in the novel, he is called Nicholas de Valance in the film as a way to make him part of the Norman elite.

As Neufeld (2007: 2) wrote: 'the medieval Church [is] an institution, as well [...] its individual representatives, whose discourse is empty and self-serving and whose focus on cosmic time succeeds only in ensuring the commoners' passive acceptance of present wrongs – whether they be divinely wrought, such as the plague, or socially orchestrated, such as the conspiracy uncovered by Nicholas and the players'.

Nicholas quotes from *Romans* 8:18 ('For I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory which shall be revealed in us', NKJV). A letter written to the Christian community in Rome in a context of Jews and gentile Christians, with the purpose 'to set before the Roman Christians a clear exposition of the gospels of salvation for both Jews and Gentiles by faith apart from works of the law, and to enforce certain great principles of Christian morality, in order to protect them against the possible assault of judaising error, and to build them up in Christian character particularly in the matters affecting their relation to the state and their internal harmony' (De Witt Burton, 1895: 372). An ethical or theological concept of the relation with death and creation (Lawson, 1994: 559-565; Myers, 1993: 42-43; Clifton Black II, 1984: 427-428) has been reinterpreted in the film to sound like a defeatist message for the peasants in their hard life. In other words, the peasants should reconcile with the harsh conditions they are in and accept the feudal society as it is.

3.3 The People: '… from the blood we sweat'

> En nationalité, c'est tout comme en géologie, la chaleur est en bas.
> J. Michelet, *Le Peuple*, 1846 (1946), pp. 121-122.

> Là-bas, cependant, il y a dans sa terre un homme qui soutient que sa terre est libre, un alleu, un fief du soleil. Il s'assoit sur une borne, il enfonce son chapeau, regarde passer le seigneur, regarde passer l'Empereur. 'Va ton chemin, passe, Empereur, tu es ferme sur ton cheval, et moi sur ma borne encore plus. Tu passes, et je ne passe pas… Car je suis la Liberté.'
> J. Michelet, *La Sorcière*, 1862 (1966), p. 59.

According to Bildhauer (2011: 11-12 & 151-212), one of the three characteristics that defines medieval film as a genre is the perceived anti-individualism of the age. As the medieval was a 'communal time', when the individual was 'subsumed into a collective body', characters in medieval films could never be 'modern individuals'. In fact, they would always remain a part of some 'wider collective' where 'they lose their individual distinction'. She refers to characters such as Gavrilo and Vasili in *Alexander Nevsky* (Eisenstein 1938) who are not to be seen as two distinct individuals, but as proud representatives of the Russian nation. As support for this claim, Bildhauer refers to Jacob Burckhardt's (1818-1897) seminal *Die Kultur der Renaissance in Italien*, first published in 1860. It is said that this work invented 'the Renaissance' as the time when the modern state emerged, the world was being discovered and, more important here, modern man was born (Mali, 1991: 90):

> In the Middle Ages both sides of human consciousness – that which was turned within as that which was turned without – lay dreaming or half awake beneath a common veil. The veil was woven of faith, illusion, and childish prepossession, through which the world and history were seen clad in strange hues. Man was conscious of himself only as a member of a race, people, party, family or corporation – only through some general category. In Italy this veil first melted into air; An *objective* treatment and consideration of the State and of all the things of this world became possible. The *subjective* side at the same time asserted itself with corresponding emphasis; man became a spiritual *individual*, and recognized himself as such. (Burckhardt, 1958: 143)

On *Condottieri* (Trenker 1937), for example, Bildhauer wrote that the men are 'comrades', fighting for their home community under the natural leadership of Giovanni delle Bande Nere, and are defined by their togetherness rather than their individuality. These men do not fight for money, but for their 'home community'. Not incidentally, this film has been read as a fascist propaganda. Also *Luther* (Till 2003) is read from this perspective as Luther's ideas 'resonate with the people' and as he 'draws upon the power of community', contrasted with the Church that only treats the people as 'numbers'. Other examples are *Alexander Nevsky* (Eisenstein 1938) on 'uniting the people in their fight for the rural homeland' (Bildhauer, 2011: 166) and

different Nibelungen films (*Die Nibelungen*, Lang 1924; *Die Nibelungen*, Reinl 1966, *Sword of Xanten*, Edel 2004) that deal with the difficult relation between the 'Nation's Lost Past' and Germany's nationalist-socialist heritage (Bildhauer, 2011: 172-189).

The concept of the birth of modern man has been disputed amongst historians as it remains unclear what exactly Burckhardt meant. It is not clear whether he was referring to self-consciousness, self-assertiveness or self-reliance and on what empirical basis Burckhardt made this statement (Burke, 1995: 393-394). Additionally, Burckhardt was not blindly praising the birth of modern man as he also had attention for the backside of this: the unbridled egoism, cruelty and lack of morality. In fact, he even changed his mind on this matter: 'You know, as far as individualism is concerned, I hardly believe in it any more, but I don't say so; it gives so much pleasure' (in Burke, 1995: 393). Burckhardt wrote *Die Kultur der Renaissance in Italien* (1860) in a context of a societal evolution towards a unified modern state with a growing influence of the masses and democracy. It repelled Burckhardt as he considered this to be the destruction of authentic culture and community which would lead 'to a toning down of the human spirit, mass-consumption, and masses' (Sigurdson, 1990: 419). By studying the birth of the Renaissance, Burckhardt was looking for those elements needed for a cultural renaissance which he craved for in his own age (Raedts, 2011: 277-284; Mali, 1991: 99; Sigurdson, 1990: 425-427).

While Bildhauer's statement on the anti-individualism may be a valid point for romanticised constructions of the medieval in films, we argue that this is not the case for films on the Dark Ages. For example, as Chapman (2012: 330-332) wrote, many protagonists in medievalist films can perfectly be seen as modern individuals. William of Baskerville, for example, is a rational *uomo universale*, self-conscious to the point of being vain and is an individual in its own right. We argue that Burckhardt's concept of the birth of modern man, placed at the end of the Middle Ages, is not a useful concept to analyse films on the Dark Ages.

In this section we turn to the other side of the feudal divide and describe the world of the common people. Two elements will be of importance here. First, we will discuss the protagonist in films on the Dark Ages who, contrary to what is often the case in romanticised constructs of the medieval, is not related to the elite but is a common man or woman with a rather common profession. Second, we will discuss the different strategies applied by the common people to deal with this feudal divide. Contrary to what Woods (2014: 8, see supra, 2.4, p. 75) suggested, we claim that there are different possible exits for the people out of the medieval, rather than merely waiting for the Renaissance to come. We argue that there are at least three different ways in which can be dealt with the feudal conflict: by revolution, resiliency or a deus ex machina (i.e. the plague).

3.3.1 A common man hero

In their book *The Medieval Hero on Screen*, Driver and Ray (2004b: 6) offered an overview of different kinds of medieval heroes, as for example:

> … the chivalric knight, swashbuckling bandit, martyred saint, benevolent sorcerer, colonial Celtic rebel, the fastest sword in the West (or East), horseless Grail-seeker, warrior princess, alpha male in tights, to name just a few popular presentations. (Driver and Ray, 2004b: 6)

However, none of these heroes fully corresponds with the hero in films on the Dark Ages. For example, most of the protagonists in films on the Dark Ages are of common birth, and are in no way related to kings, princes or knights. Johanna in *Pope Joan* is the daughter of a simple village priest in Ingelheim. The artists both in *The Pied Piper* as well as in *The Reckoning* are also not of noble birth. Osmund in *Black Death* and William of Baskerville in *The Name of the Rose* are only monks. Richard Courtois is a middle class lawyer accompanied by his clerk Mathieu. Elda in *Le moine et la sorcière*, although she is the village healer, can be seen as an outcast. Rather than for their military skills or heroic quests, heroes in the Dark Ages excel more thanks to their mental capacities as they are mostly lawyers, scientists or artists. They have no exceptional position in society and they will never be fully part of that medieval elite.

This distinguishes them from other medieval characters who are also of common birth, but rise to become the embodiment of a nation such as William Wallace, King Arthur or the maiden from Domrémy. Also in *Kingdom of Heaven* or *A Knight's Tale*, for example, the moral of the story is precisely that people have to be judged according to their abilities, not by their ancestry. This means that also people of common descent can climb to the top of society and are given the chance to remain there. However, as Lindley (2007: 23) described, there is an alternative narrative where at the end of the story the hero again retreats from society. He called it a 'distinctly American tradition of citizen-soldiers or citizen-heroes – think of Private Ryan in *Saving Private Ryan* or Gary Cooper at the end of *High Noon* – who melt back into civilian life as soon as their work is done'. In case of medievalist films, the character of Balian, who retreats into civilian life at the end of *Kingdom of Heaven*, serves as a perfect example of this. However, these characters, unlike the protagonists of films on the Dark Ages, not only *choose* to retreat from society but also have the possibility of joining it again if this should be necessary. In *Kingdom of Heaven*, for example, Richard I is explicitly looking for Balian to join him in his crusade. And even if they die, such as William Wallace, King Arthur or Joan of Arc, their memory is always kept alive in society as the hope remains that one day, they will return. Just as King Arthur's famous epitaph, these characters are 'rex quondam, rexque futuris' or the 'once and future kings' (Garet, 1983: 6).

Protagonists in films on the Dark Ages, however, always remain on the side of the people. Where William Thatcher of *A Knight's Tale* is accepted as a knight, and Balian in *Kingdom of Heaven* is 'co-opted into the warrior aristocracy' of Jerusalem (Lindley, 2007: 16) and even a hero of the people like Robin Hood is considered to be a legitimate member of the elite (Gorgievski, 2000: 200), protagonists in films on the Dark Ages never become fully part of the medieval elite. Some characters in films on the Dark Ages officially have a link with the societal elite, but even then the film represents them as being quite distinct from it. For example, Antonius Block in *The Seventh Seal*, although being a knight, is no hard-bodied heroic warrior as he is the embodiment of a modern existentialist sceptic. Adso of Melk in *The Name of the Rose* is the son of a German nobleman, but throughout the film he explicitly expresses his sympathy and engagement for the common people, symbolised in his love for the nameless peasant girl. The same holds true for Mathilda de Mellerby, the wife of the lord in *Anazapta*, who stands out amongst the people of the village as she is the only one taking care of the prisoner of war. And finally in *La Passion Béatrice* where Béatrice, although clearly of noble birth, revolts against the patriarchal tyranny of her father.

Protagonists in films on the Dark Ages are no characters in a Horatio Alger narrative who can rise from rags to riches. They are fundamentally barred from becoming part of the medieval elite. Even if they are offered positions that could make them part of the elite, they will not accept it. Richard Courtois, for example, refused the position offered to him by Jehan d'Aufferre in *The Advocate* as he did not fit in the rural town of Abbeville. And if a character such as Johanna in *Pope Joan* does rise to the top of society, she has to do it in drag and dies the moment the deceit is discovered. These characters are not only exterior to medieval society, but they have no other option than to remain outside society. The main reason for this is that the protagonist can be seen as a representative for modernity, who simply does not fit – yet – in the dark medieval society. The protagonists, following the French concept of feudalism, are perhaps best compared with citizens or *citoyens*, as members of the people, not the mob nor the nation. Similar to the medieval morality play, these characters are like Everyman whose values should appeal to everyone.

3.3.2 The people and the conflict

According to Woods (2014: 8) there was 'no exit' for the medieval people. As 'the world of medieval movies is not supposed to change' they are trapped and only the coming of the Renaissance will bring redemption. We argue that from a socio-political perspective there are more redemptive strategies for medieval people than only the

coming of the Renaissance. First, we will discuss the logical outcome of the French construct of feudalism: Revolution. Second, we will focus on films where the people are not as powerless as it would seem and where the power of the lord is not as absolute as he himself believes it to be. Thirdly, there are films which are doomed to end in a deadlock until a deus ex machina, or more specifically the plague, arrives and sweeps medieval society away. This specific narrative will be discussed in the chapter on the plague (see infra, 5.1.2)

a) Revolution: The Reckoning, The Name of the Rose *and* La Passion Béatrice

> Le féodalité, voyez comme elle tient dans la terre. Elle semble mourir au treizième siècle, pour refleurir au quatorzième. Même au seizième siècle encore, la Ligue nous en refait une ombre, que continuera la noblesse jusqu'à la Révolution.
>
> J. Michelet, *L'Agonie du Moyen Âge*, 1854 (1990), p. 31.

Following the logic of the French concept of a feudal divide in cinematic Dark Ages society, the answer or the solution to the issue of feudalism must consequently be a revolution of the people (see also Spang, 2003: 136-143). This is reflected in three films which end with a revolution of the people against their lord, albeit instigated by the protagonists. This revolution will offer hope for a better period to follow which can be interpreted as the coming of Modernity. This idea of Modernity, however, is not related to Burckhardt. Where the concept of the people in films on the Dark Ages is evaluated positively, Burckhardt firmly opposed to the idea of the masses, democracy or any other form of egalitarianism. After the *Sonderbund Krieg* in 1847 Burckhardt, for example, called the people 'splendid still undeveloped characters, ripe to fall into the hands of the first swine who comes along, and to behave like beasts' (in Sigurdson, 1991: 420-421). He disapproved of the French Revolution and the subsequent 'Age of Revolution' as it interrupted the 'spiritual' or 'cultural continuum' of Europe (Tonsor, 1997: 5; Sigurdson, 1991: 430-431). We argue that the concept of the people in films on the Dark Ages is more closely related to Michelet's concept of the people. His concept of history focused on the long struggle of the people for freedom which would culminate in the French Revolution.

In *The Reckoning*, when the travelling artists led by Martin have shown the truth of how it was lord De Guise who abducted and abused the children to the people of the village (which we will discuss in the next chapter, see infra, 4.1.3), the people demand justice. When lord de Guise comes out and stands in front of his people, he is symbolically slapped by one of the women of the village who presumably lost one of her children as well. Shortly thereafter, De Guise is lynched by the people of his village and his castle is set ablaze. Where Linden (2004) considered this to be just

another case of 'mob justice', we argue that the scope of these events can be seen as more than only that.

The reason why the people turned against their lord was because they had just seen the new play of the artists in which the crimes of the lord had been revealed. When the King's Justice comes to thank Martin for removing the threat of a rebellion against the King, it becomes clear that Martin had other motivations. He did not do it for the King, but for truth and justice. And, more significantly, Martin is also planning to continue performing this new play wherever these travelling artists will go in the future. Just when he says this, he significantly looks to the burning castle of De Guise as if he is offering the promise to end a lot more feudal abuses in the future (see also Neufeld, 2007: 2). In other words, the political ambitions and consequences of this new play may be far reaching. Contrary to the King's Justice who believed that the people did not revolt out of consent, the film suggests that if the people know the truth, justice will follow.

Additionally, there is the role the mute woman and healer, who was falsely accused by lord de Guise because she was too popular and influential amongst the people (see infra, 4.2.2a, pp. 176-177). During the uprising of the people she is placed at the centre of action, as a leader of the people who takes care of them, perhaps comparable to Marianne as a symbol of 'La Liberté' in Delacroix' famous painting on the July Revolution *La Liberté Guidant le People* (1830). This resembles what Jones (1991: 78) described as the influential narrative on the French Revolution where 'Prince Charming rescues Marianne from the clutches of a wicked, mean-spirited old Stalinist Baron'. This leads to an ostensible ambiguous but still coherent reading of the film where the solution to the English myth of the Norman Yoke is a French Revolution. The film offers hope that the changes that happened at the end of the film will have further consequences for the good and will lead to a better and modern society.

A similar conclusion can be drawn for *The Name of the Rose*, albeit with a more limited scope. During the film the divide is made between the exploiting abbey and the people who suffer from it. The contrast is enhanced when Bernardo Gui arrives at the scene, as always surrounded by soldiers to protect him from the people. Especially during the scene when Remigio, Salvatore and, more importantly, the girl from the village stand on the stake, it is shown that Bernardo Gui really needs those soldiers. During the turmoil and the end of the film, when the library is set ablaze, the people are finally able to turn against him. Where Adso fails to keep him inside the abbey, the people are able to take their vengeance when the cart of Gui gets stuck in the mud. They gather around his cart and push him down the hill, where Gui falls on a

torture instrument of his own device and dies.[35] In other words, given the opportunity, the people finally saw their chance to be free and did not hesitate. Historically, Gui died in his bed of old age. Again, the people were not demonstrating the silence of consent, but it was fear and brute force which kept them down. Again, this overthrowing of the dominance of the abbey and the killing of the Inquisitor by the people also holds the promise of better times to come. Woods (2014: 116) already wrote that this period was a 'watershed of European History'.

Although Hay (2000: 15) wrote that Tavernier's films were 'in fact primarily political dramas', he considered *La Passion Béatrice* one of the only two films by Tavernier, the other being *Un Dimanche à la Campagne* (1984), to be 'apolitical'. However, we disagree with this and argue that the patricide of Béatrice de Cortemare can be given a political reading, similar to what happens in *The Reckoning* and *The Name of the Rose*.

Traditionally, the role of the accomplices in the Cenci-case is downplayed by making Béatrice the sole focal point of the story as a romantic heroine or as a martyr (Ricci, 1926: 321).[36] The dramatic appeal of the story is usually found in the contrast between her beauty, frailty and innocent look and her brutal, violent and tyrannical father. This aspect is mostly linked to a famous painting by Guido Reni (1575-1642), which was long, but falsely, been considered to be the painting of Béatrice Cenci painted just before she calmly went to her death. According to Polláková (2011: 386) this painting was one of the most admired works of art in the nineteenth century. Her angelic face and soft features, contrasting with the nature of her crime, are also said to have inspired Shelley to write his play. The central question of most works on Béatrice Cenci was to what degree her and her family's suffering could justify the murder. In other words, does the incest justify the patricide (Marc Hélys, preface to Ricci, 1926: v; see also Dempsey, 2012: 881; Kim, 2012: 765; Blanks, 2005: 50; Nicholl, 1998: 23-27; Mastrangelo, 1967:131)?[37] Or, perhaps, are we more interested in her story to feel ourselves morally superior because we, as moderns, would show more clemency than the Pope himself did at the time? As Marc Hélys for example claimed:

[35] *Que la fête commence* (Tavernier 1975) concludes with a scene that announces the coming Revolution as enraged peasants destroy the Regent's carriage and set it aflame (Greene, 1991: 991).

[36] It was in fact Fransesco's wife, Lucrezia, who tried to drug him and dealt the fatal blows. She was assisted by Olimpio Calvetti, the guardian of the castle, and a hired hand. The architects behind the murder, however, were Lucrezia, Béatrice and Giacomo, the eldest son of the count.

[37] 'Cette criminelle si charmante n'est-elle pas une émouvante victime?' (Marc Hélys, preface to Ricci, 1926: v). See also the opera on Béatrice Cenci by Berthold Goldschmitt (1951) that focussed on the question whether 'incest justifies murder' (Blanks, 2005: 50). This is comparable to Puccini's *Tosca* (1900) or Benjamin Britten's *The Rape of Lucretia* (1946) on the question which is the lesser sin between rape, murder and suicide.

> Un jury moderne lui serait indulgent. C'est au moins l'opinion d'un grand jurisconsulte italien qui, d'après l'ouvrage de Ricci, a écrit et publié la défense de Béatrice dont il réclame avec assurance l'acquittement. Sans aller aussi loin, les plus sévères d'entre nous lui accordaient le bénéfice des circonstances atténuantes. Qu'on en juge. (in preface to Ricci, 1926: v-ix)

Tavernier focuses in his film on the suffering of Béatrice which would eventually bring her to kill her own father. Also Tavernier is trying to make sense of her misery and how she deals with it, which explains the title of the film: 'Parce que c'est la passion dans tous les sens du terme: la passion dans le sens de la souffrance et la passion dans le sens religieux' (in Groult, 1988: 34). From this perspective the story of Béatrice fits quite well in the oeuvre of Tavernier as he again studies the effects of the context, period and environment on the actions of his characters.

However, again, *La Passion Béatrice* diverges significantly from the tradition as the film does not focuses on the guilt of Béatrice. Where in the tradition her interrogation and execution form important aspects, the film stops right after Béatrice kills her father. Because of the larger importance the story gives to François De Cortemare and the development of his character, Béatrice is seen as his counterpart throughout the story. Parallel with how François de Cortemare increasingly defies God and the world, we see how Béatrice distances herself from the tyranny of her father to the point where she refuses to submit herself to him.

During her conversation with the priest, when she accuses her father of incest, the priest claims that he is powerless against her father and advises her to obey, submit and conform. However, after having been raped by her father, Béatrice no longer plans to submit herself to him: 'Et si je refusait de me soumettre? Si je souhaitais son mort'. The humiliation of her brother Arnaud, when he is used as game for a hunt dressed as girl is for Béatrice the last straw. She whips her father in the face, which can be seen as the turning point where she finally openly defies his authority. When she returns to the castle, and in addition finds that her birds have been killed by her father, she repeats the same words her father said in his youth: 'Mon Seigneur Dieu, je vous hais'. She then walks up to her father and kills him with the same dagger François de Cortemare had once received from his father.

How can we understand this murder? Just after Béatrice killed her father, she returns to the wooden statue of Mary which has brought her comfort throughout the film. Then, Lily Boulanger's version of the *Pie Domine*, 'Pie Jesu Domine, Dona Eis Requiem' sounds on the background. Is the requiem for her father, so that he, despite everything, may rest in peace? Is the requiem for Béatrice who, by murdering her father, now seems to have followed in his footsteps and is bound to become another victim of the age? Or is she putting an end to the patriarchal rule of her father, as Manter (2009) argues? We want to add a political reading to the film by interpreting

the patriarchal terror of François de Cortemare as a metaphor for the medieval as the feudal Dark Ages.

Unlike Shelley's play where the incest was the 'controlling symbol' (Groseclose, 1985: 222; see also Potkay, 2004), we argue that the revolt of Béatrice against the father is the essential element of the film. There is a current in the tradition on Béatrice Cenci where she has been seen as a symbol for the resistance against both the decadence of the aristocracy and the Pope, because Clemens VIII (1536-1605) refused to offer clemency to the Cenci-family. In the nineteenth century Francesco Guerrazzi (1804-1873) wrote a version of the Cenci story, *Béatrice Cenci* (1854), in the context of the Roman Question, where he portrayed Béatrice as a martyr of the cruelty of the Church as the Pope enriched himself from the goods he confiscated from the Cenci-family (Ricci, 1926: 316). In the context of the film, Béatrice de Cortemare could be seen a symbol for the abuses of the Ancient Régime where lawlessness corrupted the lords to a point where they almost destroyed themselves. The era of the 'crépuscule de la chevalerie' as Tavernier called the period in which the film was set, is the transitional period between the darkness of the medieval period and a more enlightened period. Many films of Tavernier are set during transitional periods, such as the depression of the teacher in *Une semaine de vacance*, the revolutionary climate in *L'Horloger de Saint-Paul* or the regency-period in *Que la fête commence*. In addition, many films by Tavernier end with the promise of drastic change as *Le juge et l'assassin*, for example, ends with a reference to the Commune and *Que la fête commence* ends with the foreshadowing of the French Revolution (Greene, 1991: 991-995; Bion, 1984: 22-39). We argue that the symbolical act of Béatrice can be read as, again, the foreshadowing of a French Revolution. The requiem at the end of the film, therefore, can be read as a reference to the symbolical end of the medieval period as such.

An argument that would corroborate this thesis is the small, yet significant role of Maitre Blanche and Lamartin, two members of the rising bourgeoisie, whose roles are easily overlooked in the literature. They are the buyers of the lands of De Cortemare which have to provide for his ransom. At first glance they are portrayed negatively by Béatrice who is calling them more greedy than the English. However, when Lamartin visits the castle again when he is betrothed to Béatrice, he appears to be the most courteous and eloquent character of the film. After this meeting, Béatrice falls madly in love with him. However, when François de Cortemare informs him of the incest, the engagement is called off. Still, they appear to be the upcoming class, nouveau riches or just citizens, buying the lands of the old lords, and attesting of much better morals. Additionally, the names of these two characters, something Tavernier has proven himself to be very conscious about, seem to refer to Alphonse de Lamartine and Louis Blanc. Both were historians who, just like Michelet, wrote major works on the French Revolution. For example Louis Blanc's *Histoire de la*

Révolution (1848) and Alphonse de Lamartine's successful *Histoire des Girondins* (1847) in which he wrote that 'the principles of 1789 were still the goals of contemporary France' referring to democracy (Fortescue, 1987: 267-269) and compared the Girondins to 'la bourgeoisie triomphante, envieuse, remuante, éloquente, l'aristocratie du talent, voulant conqueror et exploiter à elle seule la liberté, le pouvoir et le peuple' (in Reboul, 1986: 25; Mitzman, 1987: 457). This reading also adds another meaning to the famous portrait by Guido Reni. According to the legend, this portrait was finished just moments before she was led to the scaffold. This offers a remarkable parallel to Charlotte Corday, the illustrious assassin of Jean-Paul Marat, who was executed on the guillotine in 1793.[38] Corday, just as Béatrice, was painted just before her execution by Jean-Jacques Hauer (1751-1829) and just as Béatrice, she revolted against what she experienced as a tyrant (Polláková, 2011: 382). Lamartine, writing on Corday, could easily be read in the context of Béatrice:

> Si nous avions à trouver, pour cette sublime libératrice de son pays et pour cette généreuse meurtrière de la tyrannie, un nom qui renfermât à la fois l'enthousiasme de notre émotion pour elle, et la sévérité de notre jugement sur son acte, nous créerions un mot qui réunit les deux extrêmes de l'admiration et de l'horreur dans la langue des hommes, et nous l'appellerions l'ange de l'assassinat.' (in Reboul, 1986: 28)

b) Resistance: Le moine et la sorcière *and* Pope Joan

Another strategy on how feudalism was overcome in films on the Dark Ages, is the resiliency or the resistance of the people. Where it would seem that the people were suppressed by the elite, they succeed in living their own life and managed to oppose the power of the elite to a reasonable degree without them knowing or realising it. Not coincidentally, these films are not situated during a transitional period as the medieval situation is the same both at the beginning and the end of the film. However, this is not considered to be problematic or depressing as there is a relative power balance. Two films, *Le moine et la sorcière* and *Pope Joan* follow this strategy.[39]

In *Le moine et la sorcière* the people are oppressed by the count de Villars, symbolised in the case of the serf Artaud whose lands were flooded so the count could raise carp in order to maintain his manor. As an act of rebellion, Artaud decided to break the dam of the pond which drained all the water from the pond and killed the carp. Not

[38] De Lamartine devoted many pages to Charlotte Corday (Fortescue, 1987: 263; Reboul, 1986: 20-22).

[39] Related to this idea is the world of *The Seventh Seal*, where despite all the ostensible meaninglessness in life, in the end Antonius Block finds goodness on the earth – even worth dying for.

much later the count apprehends Artaud and condemns him to starve in a prison tower. But then, when it appears that the count has won, the people show their cunning. Not only has Artaud's wife breastfed him every time she went to visit him, she also had hemp woven in her dress which allowed Artaud to make a rope in his cell. As will be a major motive throughout the film, which we will discuss in more detail in the next chapter (see infra, 4.1.2), the guards were too blind to see what was going on. During the turmoil later in the film, not knowing that Artaud still is in good physical condition, the guards leave their post which allows Artaud to escape. Also the village priest has a trick up in his sleeve which counters the power of the count. Since the count was long asking to build a chapel on the place where his father was buried, but this was denied by the village priest. However, at the end of the film, in order to free Elda, the village priest invents a relic which he can offer to the count so he can build his chapel. Contrary to the character of the village priest, who is in fact an accomplice of the lord, the village priest in this film is a member of the people. He is not fanatical nor power-hungry, but prepared to break the rules if necessary: 'A little cheating for a good cause never offended God. Take it from an old cheater'. According to Benson (1999: 58), historically, the village priests were mostly related to the common people, while the regular clergy usually had an aristocratic background.

From a political perspective, *Le moine et la sorcière* can be read a parable for tolerance, individual rights and democracy for the people. It accuses all those forces that try to impose their will on the people, be it politically or, as we will see in the next chapter also culturally. In the next chapter we will focus on the way the villagers deal with Etienne de Bourbon, the zealous inquisitor who was looking for heresy which led to the destruction of the Sacred Woods and the accusation of Elda of witchcraft.

A similar strategy to deal with the medieval darkness is followed in *Pope Joan*. The main section of the film, told in flashback, tells the story of how Johanna rose from a simple peasant girl from Ingelheim to Pope in Rome disguised as a man. As Bildhauer (2011: 104) indicates, the *Odyssey* she received from her teacher Aesculapius will be the blueprint of her own life. Throughout the film she is portrayed as a woman *from* the people who will use her knowledge to serve the people. Once appointed as medicine and herbalist in Fulda, she saves the life of innocent people who are condemned by the Church to die as they think they are punished by God. She knows, however, that with the right herbs and learning some essential hygienic rules, these people can overcome their illness. There, she educates Arn who, thanks to this education, will rise from a simple peasant boy to an important position at the court of a count. This stands in sharp contrast with the wealthy and powerful families, who can give their children important positions only because they were born into it, but from a rational point of view are not suited for it. This is made most clear with

Anastasius, the nobleman's son, whose only interest is to look after himself and his family. As his plan to demolish the poor houses in favour of a luxurious resting place for the rich, it is clear that he does not care for the common people. Once Joan is Pope, she is known as the *Papa Populi*, or the People's Pope. She builds poorhouses, irrigations, and so on. Where according to the legend Joan was elected pope because of her 'learning and piety' (Tinsley, 1987: 383), in the film she is praised for her service in function of the people. Additionally, she also has strong reformist inclinations specifically aimed at improving the conditions for women, where the legend often portrays her as an anti-feminist exemplum (see DiMarco, 2008: 64). When Anastasius tries to grab power, the people of Rome do not accept this, revolt and send him off to a monastery.

In the film, she is a new Saint Catherine, a woman who stood firm for her beliefs to the point of death. During a procession her true identity and gender are exposed as she publicly gives birth during which she dies. As a reaction to the anomaly of a female pope, the Church, or more specifically again Anastasius, tries to keep this event hidden and denies her a place in the history books. However, Arn's daughter, Arnalda, became the bishop of Paris and is now telling the story to the audience of the film. We see her write the story of Pope Joan and remitting her into the Church's history, setting the wrong right again. Again, the dark forces of medieval society have not prevailed in the end as the people are cunning enough to offer resistance.

The most remarkable aspects of *Le moine et la sorcière* and *Pope Joan* are their relatively positive portrayal of the Middle Ages as the Dark Ages. In Woods (2014: 7) perception, the medieval period was characterised by a 'tragic sense of life' meaning that people were 'doomed' if they happened to live during the Middle Ages. Most films agree with this notion and only offer a way out in death or by promising a revolution or a transition to the Renaissance. These films, however, prove that there was a way out, a middle way between oppression and luxury during the Middle Ages. The people were often more resourceful than they appear and they were not as oppressed as would seem.

c) Deus Ex Machina: The Advocate, Anazapta *and* The Pied Piper

Three films, *The Advocate*, *Anazapta* and *The Pied Piper* diverge from this scheme as in the end there is no real salutation to the medieval period. In these films, it will take a plague with the dimensions of the Black Death to end medieval society. This will be discussed in more detail in a later chapter (see infra, 5.1.2).

3.4 Conclusion

From a socio-economical and political point of view, medieval society in films on the Dark Ages is constructed according to the French nineteenth-century construct of the Middle Ages as a feudal age. This society is essentially characterised by an usurping and often tyrannical elite that oppresses and exploits the common people.

In both *The Pied Piper* and *Le moine et la sorcière* a fictionalised feudal context was added to the source text on which the film was based. In *The Pied Piper*, based on Robert Browning's *The Pied Piper of Hamelin: A Child's Story* (1842), Baron Poppendick and his son Franz, together with the Bishop and the papal nuncio, were added to the story. The film presented the elite as a short-sighted, self-interested entity that is always in need of money, workers or soldiers. Sole victims of this high-level scheming are the people, who have to do the actual work, deliver the troops or pay all the different taxes. If they do not comply, they can be whipped, imprisoned or executed. In *Le moine et la sorcière*, based on the exemplum *De Adoratione Guinefortis Canis* by thirteenth-century inquisitor Etienne de Bourbon, the film made three changes to this exemplum that show the elite in a bad light. First, the focus of the story on the origin of the holy greyhound has been shifted from the lord of the castle to the peasants. Second, a count de Villars was added to the story who, because he spends more than he earns, turned the fields of one of his serfs into ponds to raise carps for additional money. Everybody who tries to stop him, can be imprisoned or executed at will. In the words of Shiffman, the count de Villars was constructed as an Ogre or Bluebeard. Third, the inquisitor Etienne de Bourbon, who disturbs the peace in the little village looking for heresy, has been made into a member of nobility, opposed to the people.

In *The Reckoning*, set in England, a feudal society is constructed based upon the myth of the Norman Yoke. According to this myth, the native Anglo-Saxon population of England who lived in freedom and peace were subjected to tyranny after Harold had been defeated at Hastings in 1066 by the Norman William the Conqueror. The local lord in *The Reckoning* is the Norman lord De Guise, a power-hungry man who is plotting to overthrow the English King. More than only being a tyrannical ruler, De Guise was also a perverted man who, similar to Gilles de Rais, was a child-raping and murdering criminal.

In *La Passion Béatrice*, the original Cenci-story was changed on three issues. First, the story had been relocated in time and place from sixteenth-century Italy to fourteenth-century France. Second, the character of François de Cortemare and his relation with Béatrice is much more elaborated compared with the tradition. Third, the story ends just after the murder of Béatrice on her father and does not include the torture and the trial. By re-setting the story in medieval times, we argue that

Tavernier gave the story a lot more scope, essentially turning it into a parable on the human soul. Where Tavernier in his historical films focuses on the socio-economical and political context and how this shapes the people living in it, he focussed on what a medieval feudal context could do with the soul of man. François de Cortemare, a cold-hearted and tyrannical ruler who oppresses and pillages his own people, and rapes his own daughter, is primarily not an ogre, Bluebeard or Gilles de Rais, but a Don Juan. François de Cortemare is looking for meaning in life, but his quest, set in the extreme and hard conditions of the medieval feudal society, offers no relief, but only more disappointment. In the patriarchal, tyrannical world where omnipotence corrupts the human soul, there is no hope, as is symbolised in the dead children.

In *The Advocate*, the focus lies on how an economical elite oppresses and exploits the people with use of the law. The law is not an objective, rational and impartial system, but an instrument bought and controlled by the seigneur. Contrary to Courtois, the seigneur is not interested in justice, but only in order. Essentially he exploits the credulity of the people to shift the blame of his son's crimes, who is a child-raping and murdering man, to animals.

In this feudal world, the Church can either be an accomplice to the lord, or be the main usurper itself. In *The Advocate*, *The Reckoning* or *Anazapta*, for example, the local priest protects their lord in order to keep their own privileged position. In *The Name of the Rose*, the monks of the abbey are responsible for exploiting the common people and living off their sweat. The position of the Church in this film is symbolised in the scene where the carriage of the papal delegate has to be pushed through the mud by the common people, while the well-fed and luxuriously clothed delegate looks out the window of his carriage. Instead of working with brute force, the Church mainly uses fear to control the people. As fear leads to faith and the embracing of priests (*The Name of the Lord* and *The Seventh Seal*), the Church will actively instil fear in the people. Additionally, in order to keep the status quo, the Church tries to reconcile the people with the harsh conditions they have to live in. For this, the Church offers the people redemption in the afterlife (*The Name of the Lord* and *The Reckoning*).

The Name of the Rose

The Advocate

The divide between an untouchable elite and the people is symbolised in the representation of the castle as the locus of power by the lord (see also Woods, 2014: 118). For example, these low angle shots of the castle of Jehan d'Aufferre in *The Advocate*, or the abbey in case of *The Name of the Rose*, visually translate the power of the elite safely behind their thick, grey and impenetrable walls. Sometimes the lord can be found in the highest tower, literally towering out above his subjects (and spying on them as is explicitly done by lord De Guise in *The Reckoning,* as well as the abbot in *The Name of the Rose* when William of Baskerville and Adso arrive at the abbey). It is the visual translation of social inequality in architectural and geographical terms. Additionally, the elite is rarely shown among the people. And if they do, they are on their horse, in carriages or surrounded by soldiers or guards (*The Name of the Rose* and *The Pied Piper*).

A recurring theme that could serve as metaphor for the relation between the elite and the people, is rape. In *Le moine et la sorcière*, Elda had been the victim of the notorious *Droit de Cuissage* when she was sixteen, and also Etienne de Bourbon raped a girl in his youth. As a result, he joined the Church so he could not be tried by secular law and remained unpunished. In *The Reckoning* as well as in *The Advocate*, lord De Guise and the son of seigneur Jehan d'Aufferre are child-raping murderers. Where the character of the lord can be equalled with an ogre or Bluebeard, in this case they are constructed as Gilles de Rais. This historical character was once one of the most powerful men in France, but it is said that he abducted, raped and killed many children. In *Anzapta*, a film which we will discuss later, the village rape on Joan de Basset is what characterises the medieval as an age of sin. Salvatore in *The Name of the Rose* tries to impose himself on a village girl and father Albertus in *The Advocate* threatens with hell and damnation if women do not comply to his wishes. Finally, and most notoriously, is the incestuous rape of François de Cortemare on his daughter Béatrice in *La Passion Béatrice*.

Although in some films, such as *Anazapta* or *Black Death*, the feudal system is not a dominant theme in the film, it could be argued that the minor references that these films make suffice to evoke a context and meaning of feudalism. For example, where in *Black Death* the Bishop sends soldiers to kill heretics in order to save the authority of the Church, or the cruel lord and perverse bischop in *Anazapta*, this can be enough to anchor the film in an age of feudalism.

Contrary to most romanticised versions of the medieval, the protagonist in films on the Dark Ages is not to be found on the side of the elite. They are mostly of common birth (Elda in *Le moine et la sorcière*, Courtois in *The Advocate*, the artists and Gavin in *The Pied Piper*, the artists and Nicholas in *The Reckoning*), and where it does concern noblemen's son or knights, they do not behave as such (Antonius Block in *The Seventh Seal*, Adso in *The Name of the Rose*, Béatrice in *La Passion Béatrice*). Contrary to the

wise King, hard-bodied and military able princes and knights, the hero and protagonist in films on the Dark Ages are lawyers, artists, doctors or sharp-witted monks. Contrary to what Bildhauer claimed, they are not 'subsumed into a collective body', but they are rational and modern individuals. As representatives of the people in a feudal society, they will never become a full member of the elite. Unlike Lindley's 'citizen heroes', these protagonists cannot be co-opted in the medieval elite, not even when given the chance (*The Advocate*). Only Johanna, in *Pope Joan*, will rise to the top of society, but she has to do this in disguise. Once her true identity was discovered, she was scraped out of history by the clerical elite.

Despite the claim that medievalist films are inherently anti-modern, anti-individualistic and anti-democratic, this is not the case for films on the Dark Ages. These films offer history from below, focusing on the people and pleading for individual rights, a rational and impartial judiciary and for more participation of the people. For example, lord De Guise is not held accountable in *The Reckoning* for plotting against the King, or destabilising the country but he is overthrown for the crimes he committed against his people. Romanticised cinematic constructs of the medieval, epitomised in the Arthurian world, focus on the establishment represented by the King, the knights and the nation and lie close to conservative values.

Although Woods (2015: 8, see supra, 2.4, p. 75), claimed that there was 'no Exit' for medieval characters as 'the Middle Ages cannot be improved, but only [be] reborn as the Renaissance' we claim that there are additional exits. First, there is the logical outcome of French construct of the feudal society: Revolution. We argue that the uprising at the end of *The Reckoning* is more than only 'mob justice', but is constructed according to the concept of a French Revolution. After being informed of the truth through theatre, the people demand justice and overthrow the tyranny of lord De Guise. And as the artists will continue to perform their play throughout the country, the film implies that many other local tyrannies will fall as well. Additionally there is the role of the mute woman, who stood falsely accused of the murder on Thomas Wells. During the Revolution she is shown as a natural leader of the people, or perhaps even as a Marianne who is leading the people to freedom. Similarly, at the end of *The Name of the Rose*, the tyranny of the local abbey is broken and the inquisitor is killed by the people. Here as well, this situation holds an implicit promise of better times to come.

Contrary to Hay (2000: 15) who claimed that *La Passion Béatrice* was one of the only films by Tavernier that was not a political drama, we offer a political reading of the patricide of Béatrice. In the tradition on the Cenci-case, Béatrice is usually represented as a romantic heroine or martyr, whose beauty and frailty is contrasted with the brutality of her father, symbolised in the incest. Her is mostly interpreted from a moral perspective based on the question if the incest justifies the patricide. Béatrice de Cortemare, in Tavernier's version, can be read as a political fable on the

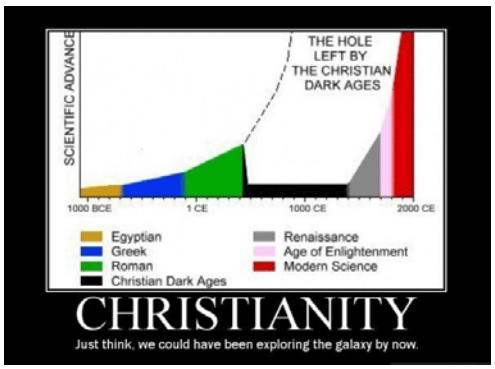
end of feudalism. Where the story of Béatrice is told as a passion play, in the end she revolts and refuses to submit herself any further to the tyranny of her father. This revolt, rather than the incest from the tradition, can be seen as the controlling symbol of the film. When Béatrice kills her father, she also ends his tyrannical rule. Her portrait by Guido Reni, which was according to the legend completed just moments before her execution, could be said to have a parallel in the painting of Charlotte Corday, who killed what she saw as the tyrant Jean-Paul Marat. It could be implied that after Béatrice ended the tyrannical reign of her father, the bourgeoisie, represented by Maitre Blanc and Lamartine is about to rise to power. The revolt against her father, in other words, could be read as foreshadowing the French Revolution.

The role of the third estate in films on the Dark Ages, however, is ambivalent. In *The Advocate* and *The Pied Piper*, the economical elite or the bourgeoisie is shown to be as greedy, self-interested and aggressive towards the people as the secular or clerical feudal elite. Only in *La Passion Béatrice* the bourgeoisie is represented as the potential successor of the feudal and tyrannical regime of François de Cortemare.

Where it would seem that the people are exploited and oppressed by the elite, in some cases they do succeed to some reasonable degree to withstand the power of the lord. When Artaud in *Le moine et la sorciere* sabotaged the count, and was locked in the tower to starve, his wife not only secretly breastfed him, but also smuggled hemp into his cell to weave rope which allowed Artaud to escape. Additionally, also the village priest, by inventing a relic, succesfully tempers the power of the lord. Similarly in *Pope Joan*, despite the misogynist society, women do succeed in rising to the top of society. Not only Johanna managed to become Pope, but also Arnalda had become the bishop of Paris. In other words, in these cases there the people are shown to be more resilient than it would appear.

IV Dark Ages Dogmatism

> L'état bizarre et monstrueux, prodigieusement artificiel, qui fut celui du Moyen Age, n'a d'argument en sa faveur que son extrême durée, sa résistance obstinée au retour de la nature. […] Que dire du Moyen Age scientifique? Il n'est que par ses ennemis, par les Arabes et les Juifs. Le reste est pis que le néant; c'est une honteuse reculade.
>
> J. Michelet, *L'Agonie du Moyen Age*, 1854 (1990), p. 31.



Internet meme: 'Demotivational poster'

This chapter focuses on the construction of the Dark Ages as an intellectual dark age because the light of reason had not yet shone upon it. In the previous chapter the divide between an oppressing elite and the oppressed people was the main structuring element of the Dark Ages as a feudal age. In this chapter on the dogmatic Dark Ages, the structuring element will be the contrast between a (medieval) dogmatic and a (modern) rational and empiricist way of thinking. The reason why the Middle Ages as the Dark Ages are considered to be a period of intellectual darkness is usually related to the presumed dominance of the Church in medieval society. The idea that faith and reason are two mutually exclusive concepts is to this day a prevalent idea in popular culture. In an episode of the popular animated sitcom *Family Guy* ('Road to the Multiverse', S8E1, 2009), for example, two of the main characters constructed a device that allowed them to travel to parallel universes where some changes had been made compared to the actual world. In one of these universes they arrive in a technologically superior society, although the year had remained the same. One of the characters explains this as follows: 'in this universe Christianity never existed which means the Dark Ages of scientific repression never occurred and thus humanity is a thousand years more advanced.'

The tradition that looks at the Middle Ages as a time of darkness already started in the fourteenth century. It was Petrarch (1304-1374) who first introduced the idea of a 'rupture' in history as he saw his age to be different – and inferior – to the glorious culture of antiquity. Compared with the light and splendour of Antiquity, Petrarch found himself living in what he called a '*sæculo tenebrae*' or a dark age. This idea of a rupture paved the way for strong negative evaluations of the ages that separated contemporary culture from Antiquity. Ironically, before this new idea of a rupture, it was Antiquity that was considered to be a dark age as it had not yet known

the light of Christianity. According to Theodor Mommsen, Petrarch was standing 'at the very fountainhead of Renaissance thought' and called him the 'Father of Humanism' (Mommsen, 1942: 242; see also Chomarat, 1990: 9-14). This feeling of cultural 'awakening' that the humanists experienced, had awoken Europe from its deep sleep which meant that this 'period of barbaric darkness' could now be left behind (Weisinger, 1945: 462-463; Ferguson, 1939: 28). However, as these humanist ideas were mostly based on cultural and aesthetic judgements, which remained restricted to an elitist group, it would be the Reformation that was responsible for anchoring more negative views on the medieval period in broader society. The Protestants claimed that the Church had strayed from the Right Path as Christ had intended when the Church became a power-hungry and thoroughly corrupt institute during the Middle Ages (see Van Liere, 2008: 31-39; Reuter, 1998: 27; Andrea, 1992: 184). During the Enlightenment, the Middle Ages became an age of blind faith, obscurantism and ignorance which prevented rational thought and science in general. According to this perspective it was the optimism and belief in progress of the Enlightenment that enabled thinkers to question established truths and open the medieval lock that was put on science (see Jackson, 2004: 184; Grant, 2004: 393-395; Biard, 2000: 251). These ideas were reinvigorated and reinforced during the nineteenth century. For example, in 1857 William Whewell wrote: 'We have now to consider ... a long and barren period, which intervened between the scientific activity of ancient Greece and that of modern Europe; and which we may say, therefore, call the Stationary period of Science' (in Stock, 1980: 1; see also Utz, 2011: 105; Reynolds, 2010: 203-204; Dendle, 2008: 117-123; Raedts, 2002; Lecoy de la Marche, 1887: ii).

Professor of economics Paul de Grauwe tied to stake by the Flemish movement, (*De Standaard*, January 15th 2014)

More than only prohibiting science due to their blind faith in the Scriptures, the dominant position of the Church in society also allowed them to actively persecute everybody who doubted these Scriptures or just thought differently (Wood, 2009; Bishop, 2008: 97-101; Ortenberg, 2006: 6; Wippel, 2002: 65; Russell, 1991: 3). Especially the medieval Inquisition, although historically not the persecuting machinery it has become in popular culture (Kelly, 1989: 450-451), is seen as the main culprit for this. In the popular perception, the Inquisition was even so thorough that, in the words of Amalvi (1996), the darkness of medieval society was only lit by the 'terrible fires of the stakes of the church'. It even posed Charles Darwin (1889: 144) for a 'perplexing problem': if the Holy Inquisition 'selected with extreme care the freest and boldest men in order to burn or imprison them', and as the best

men were 'those who doubted and questioned, and without doubting there can be no progress – were eliminated during three centuries at the rate of a thousand a year', how then, was medieval Europe ever able to leave the Dark Ages? To this day, burning at the stake is a powerful symbol of victims of fanatical persecution. For example, when in January 2014 the Belgian Professor of Economics Paul de Grauwe called the Flemish nationalist movement dogmatic, because they did not question the theory that what Flanders did itself, it does better, he was heavily criticised. Quite befittingly, the cartoon that came with the article represented De Grauwe tied to the stake, surrounded by medievalesque Flemish characters carrying torches.[40]

In this chapter we will first analyse the general characteristics of a medieval dogmatic mindset and the intolerance that is linked to it. Second, we will focus on *Le moine et la sorcière* in which, similar to the feudal divide discussed in the previous chapter, an intellectual divide has been constructed between the elitist and written culture of the Inquisitor Etienne de Bourbon and the popular and oral culture of Elda, the wise woman of the woods. Third, in *The Name of the Rose* and *The Reckoning*, both films closely related to the detective genre, we will focus on what is considered to be 'truth', on how truth can be discovered and on the relation between truth and power. Fourth, the answer that these films offer to the medieval darkness is education. However, on a meta-level we also claim that these films are trying to 'educate' their audience. In the second part of this chapter we will offer a case-study on the medieval witch as the symbol *par excellence* of the medieval dark and persecuting society.

[40] De Grauwe, P. 'Wat we zelf doen, trek je niet in twijfel'. *De Standaard*, 15 January 2014. See also the related article Lemmens, K. 'De Grauwe maakt een denkfout'. *De Standaard*, 13 January 2014.

4.1 'Anti-nature' and 'profondément artificiel'

Following the definition of Rokeach (1954: 195), dogmatism is 'a relatively closed cognitive organisation of beliefs and disbeliefs about reality, organised around a central set of beliefs about absolute authority which, in turn, provides a framework for patterns of intolerance and qualified tolerance against others'. First, we will elaborate on the specific meaning of a dogmatic mindset in the context of films on the Dark Ages, with special attention to the intolerance inherent to dogmatism. We will relate the concept of the dogmatic Dark Ages to Bildhauer's claim that a negative evaluation of writing is a 'defining feature' of medievalist films. However, we claim that this feature does not hold true for medievalist film as a whole and that the negative evaluation of writing is more related to the concept of dogmatism. Second, we offer three examples where the role of the dogmatic versus an empiricist and rational mindset plays an important role (*Le moine et la sorcière*, *The Name of the Rose* and *The Reckoning*). Finally, we will focus on the importance of education that is emphasised in these films as an answer to this dogmatic darkness. Additionally, we argue that on a meta-level these films are also trying to educate the viewer.

Two preliminary remarks have to be made. First, dogmatism is not a synonym for the Church, but is only used to refer to the filmic representation of a 'dark medieval mindset'. The village priest in *Le moine et la sorcière*, for example, was represented as a very lenient man or even an 'old cheat' and William of Baskerville, although a Franciscan, can be seen as the textbook example of a rational and critical thinker. Second, in some cases the divide between dogmatism and obscurantism (see 'clerical feudalism', supra, 3.2.5) is artificial and is only made for analysis' sake. It is debatable, for example, whether Jorge of Burgos in *The Name of the Rose* is trying to hide the book of Aristotle in order not to let the people doubt and potentially leave the Church, or because its content does not fit with the Scriptures and what he truly believes. The truth, most likely, lies somewhere in-between. However, in case of *The Advocate*, we argue that the irrational law of the countryside village of Abbeville is designed to ensure the local elite to use it for their own purposes. As neither the village priest nor the local lord genuinely believe in the judiciary as being just, and they merely use it to keep their power, we consider it more representative for the medieval as an age of feudalism (see supra, 3.2.4).

4.1.1 Dogmatism, artificiality and intolerance

According to Bildhauer (2011: 101), 'one the [medieval] genre's defining features' was 'its sceptical stance towards writing'. Writing, she wrote, was portrayed to be dangerous and manipulative as medieval films are littered 'with written death sentences, intercepted and manipulated letters, forged contracts, treacherous invitations, eviction notes and arrest warrants, usually used unfairly by those in power'. She gives the example of *La Passion de Jeanne d'Arc* (Dreyer 1928) in which the Church forged letters and tricked Jeanne to sign them. The manipulative content of this letter stands in stark contrast with the emotional truth of Jeanne as expressed in her physical appearance on the screen. However, the material paper or the parchment itself, 'in all its sumptuous, tangible glory', could be positively evaluated in medieval films. *The Secret of Kells* (Moore and Twomey 2009), for example, uses the visual style of medieval (hand)writing and presents it as something beautiful. In other words, when the material side, or the handwriting itself, is emphasised, medieval writing can offer true beauty. When writing is presented as content, however, then it is portrayed as 'dangerous and susceptible to manipulation' (Ib., p. 101).

Additionally, if the relation between the signifier and the signified in writing is symbolical, then it is open for manipulation and thus considered to be negative. The letter that Jeanne received in the abovementioned example, was forged, which meant that what was written did not refer to an external truth. However, when the relation between signified and signifier is direct, it is seen in a positive way. For example, in *Till Eulenspiegel* (Simon 1975), a donkey is picking grains that lie on the pages of a Bible. Till makes a pun when he says that 'Who reads the Bible is always right' (in German, '*lesen*' has both the meaning of picking and reading), implying that his donkey is always right. So Bildhauer (2011: 103) concludes that 'when writing is positively represented in medieval film, it is either because it is a visual signifier – as in *The Secret of Kells* – or because it overcomes the usual arbitrariness of writing, the gap between the written word and reality, signifier and signified'.

According to Bildhauer (2011: 146), the same holds true for truth claims as well in medieval films. While what can be *read* is met with scepticism, what can be *seen and experienced* (eyewitness accounts, empathy or personal observations) can be trusted. Even when it is a book that leads to solving crime as in *The Name of the Rose*, it refers to the book as an object, not as a text. Only empirical observations can claim trustworthiness. The only kind of 'parchment' that really can be trusted, is for example the snowy ground 'on which the criminal unwittingly writes his autograph' as William of Baskerville says.

Handwriting:
Material signifier (+) vs. abstract signified (-)
Relation between signifier & signified: direct (+) vs. symbolic (-)

Truth Claims:
Written evidence (-) vs. What can be seen and experienced (+)

While there is truth in the observation that writings can be forged and manipulated in medievalist films, which leads to a negative evaluation, we do not follow Bildhauer's claim on 'writing' in 'medieval film' in general. First, there are enough examples where the content of books and writings are evaluated positively. Johanna, in *Pope Joan*, seems to love books and prefers to be beaten by her father rather than scraping off the words of the parchment with a knife, as her father tells her to do. Richard Courtois, in *The Advocate*, is an adherent of the rational written Roman law, and Melius is reading and writing in *The Pied Piper* in order to find a cure for the plague. We argue that the negative evaluation of writing, which Bildhauer refers to, is actually more a symptom rather than a cause in itself. Writing in medievalist films is considered to be negative when it concerns the writings of the elite. And as writing is more linked to the cultural elite, in a medieval context this consequently often refers to the Church. Because the Church blindly and exclusively follows the Scriptures, and these Scriptures do not always conform with reality, writing is considered to be something negative. The reason why Johanna had to scrape the words off the parchment with a knife was because the content of that book contained wisdom that was not in conformance with Christianity. Johanna's father, not coincidentally the village priest, did not accept any other wisdom outside what could be found in the Scriptures. The tension between different kinds of truth is an important motive in films on the Dark Ages. Just as Antonius Block in *The Seventh Seal*, in the words of Rohmer (1975: 134-135) as a modern Faust, unknowingly confesses to Death: 'I want knowledge. Not Faith. Not presumptions. Just knowledge.'

This tension between faith and (real) knowledge is often expressed in films on the Dark Ages in the difference between writing and seeing. As the Church believed that all Truths had already been told by Christ and were written in the Bible and the Scriptures, there was simply no need for additional knowledge. As Kemp (1991: 8-9) wrote, 'any innovation will be a denial of Christ's teaching'. And as the Church dogmatically followed these Scriptures, without questioning their value or adapting them to new circumstances, these writings are often presented as being out of touch with reality. An important propagator of this idea was the French nineteenth-century historian Jules Michelet (1798-1874). He wrote that as the Church believed that all truths could be deducted from the Scriptures, there was no need for additional sciences such as chemistry, mathematics or physics. In *La sorcière* (1862), Michelet (1966: 284-285) added that the Church would benefit from studying mathematics as they were burning people who claimed that three was three, and not one as the

Christians postulate in the doctrine of the Trinity. Michelet considered many of these Church doctrines to be completely out of touch with reality and called the worldviews of the Church 'bizarre et monstrueux' as well as 'prodigieusement artificiel' or shortly put: 'anti-nature' (1966: 112). These ideas will form a main motive in *Le moine et la sorcière*, which we will discuss later in this section (see infra, 4.1.2), as well as Michelet proved to be hugely influential in creating a romantic construct of the witch, which will be discussed in the second part of this chapter (see infra, 4.2.2).

This dogmatic belief in the Scriptures is one of the main causes of the superstition and ignorance that characterises medieval society. As the worldviews of the Church are artificial and out of touch with reality, and persecuted everyone who thinks differently, this results in an intellectual dark world. This dogmatic thinking is used in films on the Dark Ages as an alienating device for modernity to show how different medieval people were, or more specifically how mentally 'underdeveloped' they were back then. Take, for example, the opening narration in *Black Death*. At the beginning, we hear a voice-over introducing the story to the audience:

> [The Year of our Lord 1348] The fumes of the dead hung in the air like poison. A plague more cruel and more pitiless than war had descended upon us. A pestilence that would leave half our kingdom dead. Where did it come from? What carried its germ? The priests told us it was God's punishment. For what sin? What commandment must we break that would earn this? No, we knew the truth. This was not God's work, but devilry. Or witchcraft. And our task, to hunt down a demon, was God's cure.

During this short speech, modern ideas are implicitly juxtaposed with medieval ideas related to the origin of the plague. At first, the narrator refers to the miasmatic theory, which links the origin of the plague to a general corruption in the air. The narrator also refers to the idea that the plague was a divine punishment for human sins, but he seems to be quite sceptical towards this idea ('For what sin? What commandment must we break that would earn this?'). Just when he asks the question 'where did it come from', the film cuts to images of rats running away, of which we now know that these little animals spread the plague. Although the link between rats and the plague was made early on, as is visible on the painting *The Plague at Ashdod* (1630) by Nicolas Poussin, it was not known before 1890 that rats were in fact also the etiological agent of the plague (Harris, 2006: 245; Boeckl, 2000: 9). When the narrator then uses modern terminology when asking himself the question 'what carried its *germ'*, followed by his sceptical stance towards the priests, and then claims to know the *truth*, it would seem that the narrator is a modern thinker. However, after building up these small indications of a modern mindset, this is quickly cut short when he starts referring to exactly the opposite when he expresses his belief in the existence of devilry, demons and witchcraft. And the solution to these issues, 'God's cure', is, as it befits the construction of the Dark Ages, violence.

That medieval knowledge is not always in line with how we, as moderns, think, is also attested in *The Name of the Rose*. The old monk Jorge of Burgos, not coincidentally blind as his blind faith prevents him to see the world as it really is (literally and figuratively), claims that laughing is not allowed, because it cannot be read in the Bible that Jesus ever laughed. He adds: 'A monk should not laugh! Only the fool lifts up his voice in laughter. […] Laughter is a devilish wind which deforms the lineaments of the face and makes men look like monkeys'. Of course, this argument has also to be seen in the context of the second book of *Poetics* by Aristotle, which was completely devoted to the topic of humour, and humour is seen as the enemy of faith. Also the monk Berengar, who is a homosexual, punishes his flesh by flagellating himself because homosexuality is a grave sin according to the Bible. Similarly, in *The Pied Piper*, when the plague arrives in Hamelin, the Bishop considers it to be a punishment from God. His answer to this crisis is that 'Flesh must be humbled. More flagellations!'. Christianity, in other words, is as Michelet indicated, an enemy of nature or the human body. It is about the Words which were written down and which have to be followed in order to get into heaven, not about the material and sinful life on earth. Also in *The Seventh Seal*, God has been called 'Hater of Life' by a critic (Holland, 1959: 267).

Another element of the superstition and ignorance related to Christianity, is the use and belief in relics (Ward, 2010: 275; see also Hubert, 1952). In *The Pied Piper*, for example, the character of the pilgrim is a devout Christian who collects all kinds of absurdly sounding relics. He not only claims to have a splinter of the Holy Cross, but also a sock of Sir Becket. His character follows a coming-of-age-pattern when during the film he evolves from a naïve pilgrim to the point when he arrives in Hamelin and experiences the greed of the Church. At the end of the film, he has seen the world for what it is: 'It's all pointless. This cathedral's a sham. The architect should be hanged. […] They don't know how to do anything anymore. There's no craftsmanship left these days, no standards, just greed. Makes me wonder if I believe in God.' At the end of the film, the powerlessness of the relics is once more attested as the pilgrim gets the plague and dies. In *Pope Joan*, the commercial side of relics is demonstrated where a market vender tries to sell Johanna the milk of the Holy Mother Mary. Here, the idea is introduced that the people's ignorance can be exploited as well. However, the critical Johanna tastes the milk and deducts from it that it is impossible for milk to stay warm and fresh for that long. And also in *Le moine et la sorcière*, the village priests invents a relic so he can offer it to a credulous count, who in return, will release Elda. Relics, in other words are presented as merchandise for credulous people, with no real 'divine power' at all.

In contrast with the dogmatic truths form the Scriptures, classical knowledge is held in high esteem by the protagonists. Aesculapius in *Pope Joan*, for example, teaches Johanna Homer and Plato as well as he teaches her to read and write Greek.

This not only sharpens her abilities to reason, as she demonstrates when she is accepted as a student at the cathedral school in Fulda, but it also enables her to read a parchment written in Greek that she discovered at a market. The superior knowledge of Antiquity is demonstrated as this parchment instructs how to build automatically opening doors by using hydropower. Later in the film Joan will use this technology to fool Lothar's army into believing that it was God who was literally closing the door on them in Rome. Lothar's credulous army, unaware of the technological power that lied behind the automatically closing doors, saw it as a divine intervention and immediately left Rome. In *The Pied Piper*, Melius is teaching Gavin the writings of Papius the elder and Herodotus. Finally, also in *The Name of the Rose* the value of classical knowledge is praised, not only by William of Baskerville's love for Aristotle, Ovid or Virgil, but also when Adso finds his way out of the labyrinth thanks to using a thread of his clothing, referring to the thread of Ariadne which allowed Theseus to find his way out of the labyrinth of the Minotaur. However, this Classical knowlegde is always used in direct juxtaposition with medieval ignorance. Arguably, it is not only the intrinsic value of Classical knowledge that is being praised, but rather as a way to denounce the Christian way of thinking. We will return to this issue when discussing non-Christian medicine (see infra, 4.2.2b).

According to the definition of dogmatism this 'relatively closed cognitive organisation of beliefs and disbeliefs about reality', which can be found in the Scriptures, is considered to have an 'absolute authority'. In other words, there is no questioning the Truth of the Scriptures. The consequences of being on the wrong side of the Truth in films on the Dark Ages can be quite radical. For example, from a feudal logic we already referred to the case of *Black Death* where the religious fanatic Ulric was prepared to wipe out an entire village because he believed the villagers were heretics. Here we will discuss two general victims of a dogmatic reading of the Scriptures as attested in films on the Dark Ages: women and Jews.

The Middle Ages have a very bad reputation in popular culture on the position of women. Church fathers, as for example Ambrosias and Augustine, are known for their misogynist comments. Nonetheless, there was a large degree of tolerance towards women during the Middle ages. However, it is known that in case of England this changed around 1250 AD (Cantor, 2003: 166-171). In any case, as Driver and Ray (2004a: 7-8) noted, 'depiction of women has not necessarily become more enlightened since the medieval period'. Where in the feudal society the serf was nothing more than the lord's property, the women were also subjected to the *ius primae noctis*, meaning that they had no rights over their own body. In *La Passion Béatrice*, when François de Cortemare returns home, he encounters a woman who had just given birth in the snow. Without much ado he claims her, throws her over his son's horse and reassures her that she will not be harmed, as she is *his property*. Not

much later, however, and while that woman is still recovering, François de Cortemare rapes her. Also in *The Pied Piper*, the mother of the young bride Lisa makes it quite clear what is expected of women in medieval society. She explicitly orders Lisa to 'show more bust' and adds: 'What do you think men are interested in anyway? What do you think they look for in a woman?'.

The misogyny in films on the Dark Ages is often explicitly explained as the result of a dogmatic reading of the Scriptures. Especially *Genesis 3* on *The Temptation and Fall of Man*, the first letter of Saint Paul to Timothy especially *I Tim. 2: 11-14* and the writings of the Church Fathers are seen as the main misogynist texts. Additionally, we will also refer to the legend of the council of Macon.

A film where misogyny is a central issue is *Pope Joan*. During the first part, which focuses on Johanna's youth, the film refers to many misogynist arguments based upon the Bible. The first example is given when her mother gives birth to Johanna. The father, a textbook example of a dogmatic Christian zealot exclusively living by 'The Word of our God', refuses to assist his wife because he considers it to be women's work, 'lowly and unclean'. In addition, he refuses the midwife to use herbs to ease the pain and quotes *Genesis 3:16*: 'In sorrow thou shalt bring forth children'. He does not, however, quote the rest of this verse which is even more notorious in the discussion on the position on women in the Bible: 'yet your desire shall be for your husband, and he shall rule over you' (Davidson, 1988: 124-126; Busenitz, 1986; Foh, 1974/1975). However, when the midwife warns him that if he does not assist, his wife might die, which means he will have a more difficult time getting through the winter. Suddenly, he is able to help. In this specific example, his self-centeredness seems to be more important than what the Scriptures wrote. However, when the young Johanna had learned to read and write, this again angers her father who calls her an 'unnatural creature' who will bring the Wrath of God upon them. Also when she is in the Scola, the intellectual climate is against her. Odo, her teacher, is fervent misogynist who is firmly against educating girls:

> It goes against God's will to accept a woman at the cathedral school. It is also pointless. Women do not posses natural ability to draw logical conclusions. The useful sections of the female brain are so small women are incapable of understanding higher ideas or concepts. Saint Paul himself has asserted this truth that women are subservient to men as determined by the order of Creation in hierarchy and strength of will.

Later, frustrated when Johanna appears to be the best pupil, Odo punishes her for no real reason and reminds her to think of what Saint Paul wrote to Timothy (1 Tim 2: 12): 'I *suffer* not a woman to teach not to *usurp* authority over a man, but to be in silence'. The film, not coincidentally, chooses the more harsh wordings of the *King James Bible* instead of the *New King James Bible*: 'And I do not *permit* a woman to teach or *to have* authority over a man, but to be in silence' (this letter is also the main argument for misogyny in *Agora*, see infra, 6.2, pp. 264-265). There is a lot of debate

on the meaning of this verse. For example, the verb 'authenteo' (in the film translated as 'to usurp authority', although it may also simply mean 'to have authority over'), appears only once in the Bible, making its meaning quite unsure (see e.g. Zamfir and Verheyden, 2008; Wall, 2004; Baldwin, 1995). The film, however, refers to a literal and dogmatic reading of this verse and connects it to the existing stereotype of medieval misogyny.

Other films as well refer to passages of *Genesis* 3. In *The Reckoning*, for example, the first play that the travelling artists perform is *The Fall*, or: 'how women led her man to fall'. The same play is performed in *The Pied Piper* at the loveless and arranged wedding of Lisa and Franz. During the wedding, the Bishop also makes misogynist statements with references to *Genesis* 3:

> For as much as thou has decreed that all wickedness is but little to the wickedness of woman. That her body is filled with vanity and lust seething with corruption. Yet, we beseech thee to grant this wretched daughter of Eve the origin of all worldly sin such humility of mind and body that she leave her deceitful ways and submit to the righteous and blessed hand of her husband, lord and keeper until she returns to the dust whence she came.

Also in *The Name of the Rose*, when Adso asks about women, William of Baskerville tells him that 'the scriptures are very clear': 'Proverb warns us, "woman takes possession of a man's precious soul". While Ecclesiastes tells us, "More bitter than death is woman"'. However, it is suggested that these Church Fathers are perhaps not the most reliable source when it comes to the topic of women. As William of Baskerville admits, 'of women, Thomas Aquinas knew precious little'. His personal meaning is also much more nuanced than the Scriptures: 'I find it difficult to convince myself that God would have introduced such a foul being into creation without endowing her with some virtues'.

Finally, both *La Passion Béatrice* and *The Advocate* explicitly refer to the idea that women were considered to have no soul during the Middle Ages. Where father Albertus in *The Advocate* refers in court to the idea that women and animals have no souls, in *La Passion Béatrice* a dead baby girl does not need to be buried because she has no soul anyhow. The origin of this idea, which is not explicitly mentioned in the film, is usually the council of Macon in 585 AD, where it was supposedly decreed that women had no soul (Kurth, 18--: 16). However, most likely this story is the result of a misunderstanding in the seventeenth century. A Lutheran, and misogynist, priest Johannes Leyser (1631-1685), whether or not consciously, mistranslated the word 'homo' from a text of a young German scholar Valentius Acidealius (1567-1595). Where Acidealius was writing about 'mankind' having a soul, Leyser translated it as if only 'men' had souls. And although the Church officially denied the idea that women had no soul as soon as 1651, the idea would prove to be enduring (Nolan, 1997: 13-14; see also Fleischer, 1981).

Similarly, as the Jews have a different belief than what can be found in the Christian Scriptures, this results in overt anti-Semitism. In *The Advocate* we see how Jews have to wear distinctive marks on their clothing, and young Jewish boys are being hunted and killed. And where rats and pigs can be called as witnesses in court, Jews cannot. Also in *The Pied Piper*, there is a conflict between the Church and Melius as the town's scientist. Melius, as a non-Christian, does not believe that the plague is a punishment from God and starts looking for a cure. He convinces the Mayor to start building 'traps, ditches, bonfires, we most have smoke, fumigation'.[41] However, this implies that the construction of the cathedral will have to be delayed, which the Baron immediately refuses. And also the Bishop refuses to listen to Melius, purely because he is a Jew and therefore a heretic. Instead of Melius' rational measures, the Bishop want 'prayers, processions, benedictions. Whores must be expelled. Gambling must stop. Flesh must be humbled. More flagellations'. This conflict between Melius and the Church climaxes in the Inquisitorial charges that are laid against him:

> It has been established by reference to doctrinal law that the plague of rats was sent as a sign, a warning against the wickedness and depravity which threatens to engulf us all. But all this, my lords, Melius denies, for this is the man who first introduced rats into the city. The man whose witchcraft has been devoted to spread of disease and heresy amongst the people. His imprisonment has brought us respite, but a temporary respite only. Unless, my Lord, we now make an example of him, and surely the wrath of God will vent itself again on us, and the black death carry us all to the grave.

To which Melius responds:

> My lord, I have listened to all the charges laid against me and I have already replied to each one of them separately. I claim no special rights. I belief myself to be a modest man, I am sure of nothing. Except perhaps that I am now unfairly judged. […] I only regret that I have not succeeded in my researches, for now I shall not be remembered for anything.

In the end, Melius, as a representative of a modern, rational and critical thinker, is sentenced to burn at the stake.

In other words, there are two kinds of truth in films on the Dark Ages. The first is the dogmatic truth, which can be found in the Scriptures. However, this only leads to intolerance as attested in the misogyny and anti-Semitism. On the other hand, there is non-Christian knowledge, as for example Classical or Jewish knowledge. But because of the central position of the Church in medieval society, these divergent opinions are to be persecuted. In the next section, we will focus on the a specific case where the knowledge and the truth of the Church comes into conflict with the rational and pagan knowledge of Elda, a wise woman of the woods.

[41] Arguably, this does not lead to a more positive representation of the Mayor or to an implicit reference to the common sense of the third estate. The film already demonstrated that he did not want to listen to Melius when he first showed a black rat to him. In addition, he has no interest in the building of the cathedral. Stopping the construction, therefore, has no effect on his affairs.

4.1.2 Elite culture versus peasant culture in *Le moine et la sorcière*

In the previous chapter the feudal divide between the count de Villars and his villagers was discussed. Despite the fact that the count had the power to take away the fields of his serfs, turn them into ponds, and let the ones who reacted against it starve in a tower, the people knew how to resist the power of their lord to a reasonable degree. In this chapter the intellectual divide between the Inquisitor Etienne de Bourbon and Elda as the wise woman of the woods will be discussed. At first sight it would seem that this divide, that is framed in terms of writing versus seeing, supports Bildhauer's thesis. However, we will argue that this divide is more constructed as an opposition between elite and dogmatic culture and peasant culture.

Historically, the confrontation between Etienne de Bourbon and the cult of the holy greyhound took place in the context of thirteenth century mendicant preaching. Instigated by the recent Cathar uprising, the Church, which was at the time essentially an urban religion, sent out inquisitors to roam the countryside in order to preach and protect the purity of the Catholic faith. During this process the Church also tried to eradicate local variants of Christianity, or at least tried to impose itself on older folk religions. To this purpose the newly founded mendicant orders such as the Franciscans, as well as their rivalling Dominicans, gathered simple stories in order to use them in their sermons for their uneducated audience. These stories, which evolved into the literary genre of the exemplum, were collected into books that served as inspiration for these roaming inquisitors. At the end of his life also Etienne de Bourbon wrote a collection of exempla under the title *Tractatus de diversis materiis praedicabilibus*, sometimes translated as *Les Sept Dons du Saint Esprit* as he structured his material according to the Seven Gifts of the Holy Spirit. In this work De Bourbon not only collected already existing stories from the Bible or from the Church fathers, but he also wrote down stories from witnesses he trusted as well as stories based upon his own personal experience. This makes his collection of exempla a treasure of information on the otherwise not documented worldviews of thirteenth century peasants (for a table of contents, see Lecoy de la Marche, 1877: xiij-xvj). The story of the holy greyhound is based upon De Bourbon's own experience when he preached in the Dombes area, about forty kilometres to the north of Lyon. The story that inspired the film can be found in the fourth part, 'du don de force', subdivision seven, 'de l'orgeuil', under the title *De Adoratione Guinefortis Canis* (Grieco, 2008: 279; Muessig, 2002; Geary, 2001: 186-194; Berlioz, 1989: 5; Dubois, 1980; Schmitt, 1979: 7-11 & 22-26, 1977: 6; Lecoy de la Marche, 1877: iv-xj).

Although the film claims to be directly based on the work of Etienne de Bourbon, as is stated in the credits, in fact the film closely followed Jean-Claude

Schmitt's interpretation of the story. Schmitt, as a historian of the third generation of the *Annales*, focussed in his work on the mentality of medieval peasants instead of the elite and worked with a strong interdisciplinary approach, often labelled as historical anthropology or religious sociology (Klaniczay, 2010: 194; Van Engen, 1986: 528-531). In 1979 he published a monograph, *Le Saint Lévrier. Guinefort, guérisseur d'enfants depuis le XII^e siècle*, in which he focussed on the confrontation between a thirteenth century inquisitor and the local peasants, as told in the exemplum on the holy greyhound by Etienne de Bourbon. Where other historians studied the confrontation between the inquisitors and the people in general terms of official orthodoxy that was brought top-down to the peasants, or emphasised a tense dynamism between orthodoxy and the variances between local religion(s), Schmitt framed this debate in terms of the elite versus the people (Geary, 2001: 194-197). He even divided medieval society in a 'culture cléricale', represented by De Bourbon, and a 'culture laïque' of the people itself:

> Une culture écrite, latine, urbaine, cléricale, garante de l'orthodoxie chrétienne, forte d'un pouvoir spiritual et temporal de contrainte et productrice de notre texte, et une autre culture, populaire (au sens sociologique étroite du terme), mais prise dans ce texte comme objet de description et de répression. (Schmitt, 1979: 18)

Schmitt (1979: 9) considered this divide to be 'l'un des traits les plus importants de la société féodale', but later he nuanced this claim. This presumed duality was considered to be a problematic concept by historians (see Geary, 2001: 196) and Schmitt (1998: 380 & 383) would later claim that he was not creating a dual structure as his vision of medieval culture was 'multipolar (and not dual), interactional (and not subordinate to univocal currents), and attentive to both mediations and mediators'. However, Pamela Berger in *Le moine et la sorcière* took this divide to be the structuring element of the film (Suydam, 2000: 46-47).

The way this divide is translated to the screen is by creating an opposition between writing and seeing, where Etienne de Bourbon is represented as the embodiment of the elite, clerical and especially *written* culture. As the first sentence of Schmitt's book goes: 'L'église médiévale a considérablement accru l'influence du christianisme dans la société, tout en renforçant son caractère *de religion du Livre*' and calls this a 'trait fondamental du christianisme' (Schmitt, 1979: 9, italics mine; see also Ortigues, 1981: 7). During the entire film Etienne de Bourbon is constantly associated with books and letters. For example, he is introduced in the first shot while he is reading a book and his first act in the film is handing over a letter of the Bishop to the village priest.

However, where the film seems to follow Schmitt quite closely, the meaning that is attached to written culture is not neutral. Although De la Bretèque (2004: 659) for example argued that the film kept 'assez fidèlement la construction intellectuelle de

l'ouvrage', we argue that film attached a dogmatic meaning to the concept of reading, as described at the beginning of this chapter, which can not be attested for in the historical version of the story. In the film, Etienne de Bourbon is represented as a religious fanatic who only reads the Bible or the Scriptures and does not question what he is reading. He says to Elda during one of their earlier conversations in the film that he does not *study* his books, but only uses them to *pray*. He believes that all truths have already been written and therefore he knows exactly what the people should or should not do. However, related to the concept of 'artificial knowledge' (see supra, 4.1.1), what Etienne de Bourbon reads and believes is not conform with reality. The written and elitist culture of De Bourbon does not fit in the 'real' world of the peasants. During the confessions at the beginning of the film, for example, many misunderstandings occur when De Bourbon tries to impose his mindset on the people, as to what for example 'divination', 'vetula' or even 'heresy' is. These intellectual constructs make no sense to the people. A woman explicitly asks De Bourbon whether or not the count is 'heresy' as he is taking away the fields of one of his serfs. The elite culture in the film is presented as artificial as it adds something unnecessary and unproductive to the natural way of peasant life.

It is during these confessions that De Bourbon first hears about the existence of a 'forest woman' and sets out to investigate. When he meets Elda, the woman of the woods, he is confronted with an entirely different mindset of a woman who does not live by the rules of the Church. Where Etienne only knows what he has read, Elda has been taught by her predecessor and learns from what she *sees* with her own eyes. She is presented as somebody who sees nature as it really is, even if it is in opposition with what is written in the Bible or the Scriptures. She knows the shapes and the designs of plants and rocks and has extensive knowledge of the medicinal qualities of nature. She is presented as a healing woman, a character which Berger had studied before in her book *The Goddess Obscured* (Jenkins, 2000: 59-60). We will discuss this in more detail in relation to witchcraft (see infra, 4.2.2a). The discussion between De Bourbon, who claims that there are (written) rules for healing, and Elda, who looks at nature inductively, clearly demonstrates their different mindsets:

> *De Bourbon*: There are laws for healing. God's laws, as written in the Holy Scriptures.
> *Elda*: Very wise. But I can't read, and I don't know those laws. On Judgement Day does God ask what we've read or what we've done?
> *De Bourbon*: God's will forbids strange healing practices.
> *Elda:* My practises are God's secrets found in the forest. Berry juice on the tongue, grey powder on a sore. They heal, I've seen it.
> *De Bourbon*: God's wisdom isn't seen in nature. Don't look to that imperfect mirror.
> *Elda:* I only look to it for some things, not all. But when I do, I look very hard. I learn everything in the forest.
> *De Bourbon*: Your forest is limited. Beyond, there is a vast world. And the infinity of God's Heaven all unknown to you.
> *Elda:* I do learn from God's Heaven. Every night it speaks to me.
> *De Bourbon*: It speaks to you?

Elda: Now it tells me I must pick the elderberry blossoms. They cure fever. I can't stop my work, each plant has its time.

As De Bourbon does not want to look at nature, for it is an imperfect mirror compared to God's perfect world as described in the Bible, he is unfamiliar with the real world. Significantly, after the first visit of Etienne to the village priest, the priest says to his housemaid: 'That man has the eyes of a bat … fierce, unblinking and blind'.[42] De Bourbon is unable to see anything besides the things that have already been written. And his obstinate, uncritical and zealous belief in these words even 'blinds him to human feeling' according to the village priest. In another discussion between Elda and Etienne, the debate between writing and seeing is continued:

De Bourbon: One writes about God's truths, not about plants.
Elda: Teach me. Show me some letters … the letters of God's name.
De Bourbon: We don't write God's name in the dirt. I'll write your name, Elda.
Elda: Eldamere. That's my real name.
De Bourbon: That's not a Christian name.
Elda: I was given that name when I arrived. Do you write about God's truths?
De Bourbon: One must study hard and read much before one writes. I won't write until I'm old.
Elda: Will you write about villages like this?
De Bourbon: I can learn nothing here.
Elda: I learn something every day.

At first, although Etienne finds that Elda lacks humility and is being too proud, he is willing to accept the idea that these people worship God in their own, but still Christian, way. However, one night Etienne is drawn by the sound of a baby's cries and follows a woman with her child into the forest. At this point Etienne de Bourbon discovers the rite that accompanied the cult of the Holy Greyhound. It involved a ritual where babies were being offered to the Wood Spirits. As the mother believed that her baby had been changed during the night, she asks the Spirits to give back her own child. And although Elda advises against this rite, it is she who actually performs it. When De Bourbon witnesses this ritual, his former lenience disappears. When during the ritual a wolf appears, not knowing that Elda in fact tamed the animal and used specific herbs to repel it, De Bourbon is horrified and accuses Elda the next day of heresy and witchcraft.

It is this event that will bring the film to its climactic confrontation between Etienne as an Inquisitor, and Elda as a witch. Compared to the source text, however, the film made small, yet significant changes in order to dramatically enhance the impact of the conflict. After making Etienne de Bourbon into a member of nobility,

[42] When he first meets the village priest, the priest puts himself in front of a picture of a holy dog on the wall so Etienne de Bourbon cannot not see it. In the previous chapter also the soldiers that guarded Artaud imprisoned in the tower called blind as they did not see how his wife was breastfeeding him and how she had hemp woven in her clothes which in the end allowed him to successfully escape (see supra, 3.3.2b, p. 123).

who is imposing his elitist and artificial mindset upon the peasants, the film now turns the historical accusation of 'superstition' and 'orgueil' into cases of 'heresy' and 'witchcraft'. While it can be expected that a modern audience does not know the technical historical meaning of concepts such as 'superstition' and 'orgeuil' (for this, see Schmitt, 1979: 27-41), the film uses the terms 'heresy' and 'witchcraft' to create a maximum of distance between Elda and Etienne, as well as it distances the filmic character of Etienne de Bourbon from a modern audience. At this point, Etienne de Bourbon has fully become what contemporary people expect of inquisitors: hateful fanatics who send women to the stake. However, the concept of witchcraft in the thirteenth century was not yet fully developed as we know it today (see infra, 4.2, pp. 160-161) (Bailey, 2001: 967-971, Schmitt, 1979: 52; Bailey, 2001: 967-971). Also amongst historians, opinions differ on whether or not Etienne de Bourbon was a religious fanatic.[43]

The character of Elda, on the other hand, is portrayed in a more positive light compared to the source text of the historical Etienne de Bourbon. Not only has she become a beautiful woman instead of the 'vetula' in the source text, also the ritual is shown to be more innocent than it actually was (Stoertz, 2000: 39).[44] Additionally, at first sight she seems to be truly one with the people. She takes care of the children who became sick of the insects drawn to the newly laid ponds of the lord, is a midwife (also to the wife of the Count) and in fact serves as the local doctor. However, there is an ambiguity in the way she is connected to the ritual from which it would appear that although she belongs to the people, she cannot wholly be identified with them. In fact, where the beliefs of the Church may be seen as artificial or dogmatic, the beliefs of the common people or the peasants, as symbolised in the ritual, can be looked upon as superstitious as well. In his account of Etienne de Bourbon, French nineteenth century historian Lecoy de la Marche (1877: viij, italics mine) even applauded the acts of De Bourbon: '[…] il détruit, à Villeneuve-en-Dombes, la *superstition ridicule des paysans* de l'endroit, qui avaient fait de la tombe d'un chien un lieu de pèlerinage'. It is remarkable that Elda, in the film, takes a very rational position in this debate. It is clear that while she is the wise woman of the woods, who has knowledge of the design of plants and their healing powers, she still agrees to perform the ritual. However, during the film she confesses that she in fact does not believe in the ritual herself: 'Ce n'est pas mon culte. C'est la coutume de tous les habitants de la village.'

[43] Lecoy de la Marche (1877: viij), for example wrote: 'On ne peut nier que, dans l'exercice de ses redoutables fonctions, il n'ait allié au zèle de l'orthodoxie une prudence remarquable, et qu'il n'ait cherché avant tout à ramener les égarés' (see also Berlioz, 1989: 5-6). Dubois (1980: 147), however, was less positive claiming that De Bourbon 'est dévoré de zèle, exigeant et intolérant, prompt à agir au cours d'une mission itinérante'.

[44] According to Stoertz (2000: 39) the ritual involved women tossing babies 'back and forth, leave it alone in the woods, and dunk it nine times in a fast-flowing river'.

She argues that the ways of the people are to be respected, even if one personally doesn't believe in them. And still, because she believes it causes no harm and the ways of the people are not to be changed, she complies to performing the ritual:

> When mothers came to me for help I refused to forsake them? Was that evil? […] Because for the villagers there is no cure unless a saint is involved. […] It's not my cult. It's the way of all the villagers. To make a saint of a dog they cherish is a sign of their faith.

She performs the ritual because it is the best thing to do. Any way the ritual turns out, the mothers will have peace with the result. Eventually Elda confronts Etienne by saying 'With all your learning, you know nothing'. Also the village priest gives him the advice to 'open his eyes'. Some things may happen right in front of our nose, but we do not see them. Elda says to him: 'You don't understand. You don't see. You have a disease of the eyes and I have no remedy for it.'

Etienne de Bourbon in the end realises that he has made a mistake and tries to revoke his accusations with the Lord. With help of the village priest, who invents a relic in a way to bribe the Count to free Elda in exchange for him to build his Chapel on the graves on his forefathers, Etienne succeeds in freeing Elda. For this, he even breaks his vow never to ride a horse again, in order to arrive in time to save Elda (as another symbol of reality against the artificial codes of clerical life). When Etienne has opened his eyes, he accepts the cult of Guinefort, but changes the dog into a man (Geary, 2001: 192; Dubois, 1980: 152-153). De Bourbon becomes more human and accepts the reality of human nature, which is not to be found in the scriptures. According to Harty (1999: 187), Etienne de Bourbon learns a 'lesson about humility, human frailty and forgiveness'.

Parallel to the opposition that the people and the village priest could offer against the power of the lord, in the end the people also succeeded in averting the artificial elite culture of Etienne de Bourbon. With the arrival of the mute girl Agnes, the daughter of the woman Etienne de Bourbon raped (see supra 3.2.1b, pp. 89-90), Elda's succession is ensured. In other words, the people do know how to take care of their own. The film emphasises this message by claiming at the end that the cult of St. Guinefort even survived until the twentieth century with a woman called 'La Fanchette' as the last successor of Elda. This element can also be read in Schmitt's work, although this aspect is historically contested (Geary, 1981: 237 or Albert-Llorca, 2005: 166). In the film it is used as an argument for the authenticity, or the inherent good of the people that should remain unaffected by secular abuse or artificial dogmatic worldviews. As the village priest says to Etienne:

> Remember the monks who were ordered to keep silent not even to communicate with their hands. They were so miserable that they learned to talk with their feet. You can change actions, but not the human heart.

In other words, the meaning of the film is to leave the people be who they are. As De la Bretèque (2004: 662-663) wrote, the film is essentially a parable on tolerance or the need to accept minorities in society 'les formes déviantes de la culture des masses, les cultures orales, vernaculaires, laïques, qui ont été étouffées par les cultures dominantes'. This perspective also invites a feminist reading of the film as for example Goodman (1980) did: 'Mothers, babies and nourishing breasts are much in evidence as Miss Schiffman and Miss Berger pay 20th-century tribute to the women of the time, memorialised here as victims of sexual indignities and heroines of comfort and survival'. The message of tolerance towards minorities might also explain the double position of Elda where she tolerates the peasant beliefs as they do no harm, although she does not believe in it. She is the perfect example of tolerance, even for causes which are not her own.

4.1.3 'Detecting the truth' and the Enlightenment of Art

Studying the judiciary is often a good way to gain insight in the inner workings of a society. What is, for example, considered to be 'normal', how is (legal) truth established and what excesses are to be punished? In this section we will focus on how crime is solved in both *The Name of the Rose* and *The Reckoning*. As Roger Ebert (2004) wrote on *The Reckoning*, also referring to *The Name of the Rose* in the discussion, 'in these years superstition and ignorance where the key elements in any criminal investigation'. As Bildhauer (2011: 132-33) points out, the detective genre lies very close to historiography, as both the detective and the historian try to 'reconstruct a plausible chain of events in the past from clues left in the present' (see also Strong, 2011: 298-300).[45] As previously stated, we will not focus on *The Advocate* in this section as the judiciary in Abbeville is primarily an obscurantist system, exploiting the credulity of the people, aimed at shifting the blame to animals so that the elite can remain unpunished.

In the previous chapter, the nameless abbey in northern Italy, where the story of *The Name of the Rose* is set, has already been discussed in the context of clerical feudalism where the abbey was exploiting the people for their own gain (see supra, 3.2.5). Here we will focus on the medieval mindset, or the intellectual climate in the abbey, in relation to the four murders that took place there. At the centre of the plot lies the second book of *Poetics* by Aristotle, which was reportedly completely devoted to

[45] Perhaps this contributes to the popularity of constructing investigative stories in a medieval or medieval-related context such as *Brother Cadfael*, *Le retour de Martin Guerre* or *The Da Vinci Code*.

laughter. But as laughter kills fear, and without fear there is no need for the devil, this book was considered to be dangerous. In order to protect the faith that drives the people in the arms of the Church, the blind librarian Jorge of Burgos not only tried to hide the book, but also poisoned its pages so everyone who read it would die. Jorge of Burgos is a representative of medieval thinking, attesting both of medieval obscurantism as well as dogmatism and anti-intellectualism. He not only tries to keep information away from his monks, for which he is willing to use violence if necessary, but he is also a clear example of a medieval scholar who believes that all Truths are already known to mankind and can be found in the Scriptures. During his sermon at the end of the film he could not make his view on science more clear when he claimed that what is important is the 'preservation of knowledge, not [the] search for. Because there is no progress in the history of knowledge, merely a continuous and sublime recapitulation'. Additionally, his anti-intellectual beliefs are illustrated when Jorge clearly agrees with the words spoken by the Greek translator: 'in much wisdom is much grief, and he that increaseth his knowledge increaseth his sorrow also'. This quote, from *Ecclesiastes* 1:18, is used to alienate the opinions of Jorge from the modern viewers (see e.g. Zuck, 1991: 55). Ironically, the abbey in which he lived had one of the most renowned libraries in Christianity, and has been compared with the famous library of Alexandria as the '*summum* of knowlegde' (El-Abbadi, 1990: 9), containing all the knowledge in the world.[46] However, this world of knowledge is safely kept behind the locked doors of the library and defended by the abbot, the librarian and Jorge of Burgos. In other words, science or intellectual progress in general is made impossible in the abbey (Woods, 2014: 121-122).

As all the knowledge of the world is tucked away in the library, and studying it has been made impossible, all the monks know of nature and the world they live in comes from what they have read in the Bible and the Scriptures. The artificiality and limits of their knowledge is demonstrated when the body of the illuminator Adelmo of Otranto is found beneath a tower of which the (still intact) window could not be opened. This situation is beyond the mental capacities of the monks who immediately fear the presence of the evil one in the abbey. In their unworldly mind, the monks cannot comprehend what happened and need the presence of evil to explain what happened. At this point, the abbot asks for the help of William of Baskerville, in order to appease the abbey for the upcoming debate. It is clear that William is not impressed by the 'irrational rumour of the antichrist' and approaches the murders from a wholly different perspective: 'Let us instead exercise our brains and try to solve this tantalizing conundrum'. The way William approaches the murder contrasts significantly with how the monks look at it, which can be seen as symbolical for the

[46] The labyrinth of the library was inspired by Jorge Luis Borges' *The Library of Babel.* In the film the library was visually inspired by the work of Maurits Escher as e.g. *Relativity* (Janssens, 1990: 129-132).

perceived clash between modernity and the medieval. As a critic (Canby, 1986) wrote, William of Baskerville is the 'voice of reason in an age of superstition'. His trust in his own remarkable abilities, as Adso describes his master, make him stand out in an abbey where the monks only believe in the Scriptures.

The character and name of William of Baskerville, played by Sean Connery who at the time was still mostly known as 007 (Kemply, 1986), refers both to his critical and intellectual capacities as well as his detective qualities (Haydock, 2008: 29-30). First, the name is meant to refer to the famous British detective Sherlock Holmes, referring to Conan Doyle's *The Hound of Baskerville* (1902). Just as Holmes, William of Baskerville will prove to have the necessary sharp observational and intellectual abilities that enable him to deduce a lot of information based upon small details which will bring him to unmask the real murderer in the abbey (Woods, 2014: 117; Taussat, 2001: 264). Second, and referring to William's intellectual and critical abilities, is the reference to William of Ockham (ca. 1287-1347) (Eco, 2011: 537). Just as William of Baskerville, William of Ockham was a Franciscan critical and radical thinker. As a nominalist, he did not believe in the existence of universal concepts without their material expression (the realist position) and emphasised the sensory perceptions. His thinking has influenced early modern philosophy, such as Descartes (Charalampous, 2013: 537-563; Courtenay, 1987: 3-10). This critical thinking, however, brought William of Ockham into trouble with the Church. In 1324 he was summoned to go to Avignon to defend himself against the Church which was questioning his orthodoxy. It was there where he met Michael de Cesena and became involved in the debate between the Franciscans and the Pope on the question of poverty, which can be seen in the film as well. In the end, William of Ockham had to flee Avignon and found refuge at the court of Ludwig IV of Bavaria where he persisted in his anti-papal thinking (Shogimen, 2005: 607-611). Not coincidentally, also William of Baskerville has found refuge at the court of the German emperor in the film, for taking position against the Church (Woods, 2014: 123).

William of Baskerville is introduced in the film as a man of high perception. Based upon a single observation he does not only know where the restrooms are ('When we arrived, I saw a brother making for the spot in some hast. I noticed, however, that he emerged more slowly with an air of contentment.'), but he is also immediately aware of the fresh grave on the cemetery of the Abbey. The way to obtain truth for William of Baskerville is by empirical observation and logical deduction. When he arrives at the abbey, he has brought a lot of instruments with him. Later during the film we see him use his astrolabe, which means that he studies

the stars empirically and not from some theological perspective.[47] However, as he quickly hides these instruments when the abbot enters his chamber, it is clear that this is no orthodox and accepted Christian science. In his deductive work as well, William of Baskerville works empirically, and tries to discover the underlying structures by means of deduction. He relies on his rational mind, aided by his senses such as his eyes to study the footprints in the snow, as well as his nose to discover the secret writing of Venantius. In case of the monk who was found beneath the tower, it does not take long before William of Baskerville finds an explanation that does not involve the devil. By investigating the bloodstains he easily concludes that the victim had jumped from another tower, and simply rolled down the hill to the foot of the other tower of which the windows could not be opened.

The monks, on the other hand, do not find the truth by empirical observation and logical deduction, but only based on what they have read in the Scriptures. This is made clear when a second body is found in a large pot of pig's blood. Ubertino de Casale immediately sees the link between this event and what has been written in the *Revelation of Saint John the Divine*, the fifth book of the *Arbor Vita*: 'After the hailstorm with the second trumpet the sea became blood and behold here is blood'.[48] However, this example also refers to the thin line between dogmatism and obscurantism. In order to let the monks think that the devil is at work in the abbey, the bodies can be placed according to the prophecies. This way, no suspicion will fall on the true murders: the book, Berengarius and Jorge of Burgos.

In *The Reckoning*, a feudal divide in terms of the Norman Yoke was constructed where lord Robert de Guise was not only plotting against the King, but was also murdering and sodomising young boys. One day, travelling artists arrive whose presence will change the face of the town forever. We will discuss two aspects of these travelling artists. First, the art of the actors evolves throughout the film from medieval theatre to a more modern concept of theatre. Historically, there is not much known about medieval travelling artists or their repertoire (Tydeman, 1986: 1-4), but we argue that the film constructed the artistic evolution of the artists in terms of prescriptive dogma against empirical observation. Second, in order to obtain their material, the artists act as detectives who look for information in the village that lead them to the true murderer of Thomas Wells.

At the beginning of the film, a group of travelling artists is on their way to Durham to perform a play, as a Christmas gift from their own lord to another. During

[47] This astrolabe can also be seen in *Agora* (Amenábar 2009) where Hypatia discovers the elliptic course of the earth around the sun (see infra, 6.2, p. 263), or in *1492: Conquest of Paradise* (Scott 1992) as Christopher Columbus uses an astrolabe to navigate on the sea.

[48] Not coincidentally, this book was written by the historical Ubertino de Casale (1259-1329) (see Woods, 2014: 126).

their travel, they discover that a bridge has been destroyed and that their carriage is broken, so they enter a nearby town for reparation. In order to pay for the expenses, they perform in the town square. Similar to *The Pied Piper*, they perform 'The Fall of Adam and Eve'. Not only is this play, based upon the story of *Genesis* 3, misogynist, but the role of Eve is according to the prescriptions of traditional (medieval) theatre still played by a man. The play and their performance, however, do not connect with the people. The turnout is low, the public's enthusiasm is non-existent and even the King's Justice smirks when he sees the play. In the end, the artists only earned a measly two shillings, which is a lot less than what they used to earn. Martin, the leader of the group, explains that they no longer connect with recent developments in theatre. In the city, organised guilds made it possible for artists to stage impressive versions of the entire Cycle in one week, with the best crafts- and showmanship. As travelling artists, they are no match against these better equipped guilds. But, Martin, as a creative avant-garde mind, already knows what the real future of theatre will be. According to him it is not about *how* these plays are performed, but *what* is being performed. He proposes to create a new play not based upon the Bible but on reality, breaking all medieval codes and in fact laying the basis for later Renaissance theatre.

Martin wants to create a new morality play, based on a topic that is relevant to the people. When the artists entered the village, they saw how a mute woman was condemned for the murder of the boy Thomas Wells. This caused quite a stir in the village. Martin wants to base his new story on these events and give it meaning by turning it into a modern morality play that will speak to the people. The discussion on whether or not to change the conventions of the theatre is framed as a discourse of dogmatism against empiricism. Especially Tobias, not coincidentally one of the older members of the group, is radically against the idea. He objects: 'Who dares play things that happened in this world? […] God has not revealed to us the meaning of this story'. In his world, it is the Bible that gives meaning to the world, not the other way around. Martin, on the other hand, wants to *create* new meaning himself. As he wins the vote, the plan goes on and he creates a morality play where the characters are directly based on the people who were involved in the murder of Thomas Wells.

From there on, the film relates to the detective genre as the artists now try to find the truth on what happened to the boy Thomas Wells. After a short round of interviews, the new play is performed, and this time the entire village is present. However, throughout the play, especially when the boy is accused of being lured by the mute women, his mother protests against this version which causes much unrest in the village. It is clear that they struck a chord with the audience, which is also reflected in the amount of money they made with the play. Later that night, the sheriff arrives to tell them to leave. Now it is obvious that there is something rotten in the village, and the investigation secretly continues. By this time, the film has turned into a detective film where by careful, observational research, similar to *The Name of the*

Rose, the hidden truth becomes revealed. At this point, critics have compared *The Reckoning* with *Law And Order* (Neufeld and Scott, 2004; Nusair, 2004) or a '14th century variation on reality TV' (Loewenstein, 2004) or even 'contemporary TV producers' setting out to do research on a real-life saga for dramatisation purposes (Seymour, 2004). They go interviewing the people, and Nicholas even digs out the corpse of Thomas Wells where he sees the markings of abuse. Later, another autopsy, on the strangled corpse of Simon Damian, will also deny the official version of suicide. By looking at the real evidence, just as Courtois examined the body of the Jewish boy in *The Advocate*, these autopsies reveal what should have remained hidden (Berson, 2004; Woods, 2014: 116).

The climax of *The Reckoning*, when their detective work had provided all the necessary information to create a truthful play based upon what really happened, comes when the artists interrupt the execution of the unjustly accused mute woman. Before the eyes of the gathered community of the village, the artists perform their updated play. This piece of theatre in the film, comparable to the play in the play in Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, reveals the truth to the people. Where in the book the final performance of the play was for the lord's eyes only, in the film this happens for the eyes of the entire village. Once the people are made aware of the crimes of their lord, they start to revolt and demand justice. This ends in the death of the lord and the destruction of his castle.

At this point the two main structuring elements of the Dark Ages come together. Not only have these artists succeeded in overturning the feudal society by a popular revolt, but they have also made a fundamental breakthrough in art by evolving from 'prescriptive dogma to social realism' (Neufeld, 2007: 1). Also on the cover of Unsworth's book it was claimed that this new version of the morality play, 'with its stress on psychology and argument, which as to survive as the stronger form, [was] leading the way to the secular drama of the Renaissance'. They have turned art from being dominated by old conventions that no longer spoke to the people to a 'catalyst for personal and social change' (Neufeld, 2007: 3). In the end, by critically and empirically investigating the official versions, these artitsts discovered the truth. Even the position of women has improved as during the final performance the role of the woman is actually played by a woman, where this was not the case in the book (as can be read in chapter 14, Unsworth, 1995: 169-184). Both on a feudal level and on a dogmatic level the film shows an age that transforms towards modernity. Historically, however, the medieval tradition of the morality play would endure until late in the sixteenth century and traditional conventions and techniques would prove to be more resistant to the new ways of staging of the Renaissance (Tydeman, 1978: 235; see also Coulson-Grigsby, 2008: 169-176; Potter, 1975: 58). The film, however, offers a traditional, linear view on progress in the arts where the superior Renaissance plays made the medieval obsolete.

4.1.4 The Importance of Education

Near the end of *The Reckoning*, when the investigation by Martin and Nicholas seems to fail, the King's Justice tells Nicholas that the villagers are not interested in the truth anyhow. Their silence, he claims, is the silence of consent as they get food and shelter from their lord. This does not stop Nicholas and Martin to continue their efforts and to perform their new play in which they reveal the horrific crimes of lord De Guise to the villagers. Awoken by the truth, the villagers revolt and take justice into their own hands. In other words, it was no silence of consent, but a silence based on ignorance and fear.

Not coincidentally, films on the Dark Ages attach the greatest importance to education. In the eyes of the French *philosophes*, ignorance was the basis on which the Bourbon tyranny could thrive. By educating the people, these *philosophes* thought that the people would not only be freed from their prejudices and their blind faith in the tradition, but that they would become better *citoyens* as well. For them, ignorance and servitude went hand in hand (Duce, 1971: 277; Ballinger, 1959: 97-98; see also Utz, 2011: 105). Also Michelet was an advocate of popular education (Rearick, 1971: 85), and Burckhardt considered education to be the 'only antidote for social and political ills' which was a necessary condition to reach 'civic humanism' (Sigurdson, 1990: 420). We will discuss these ideas related to films on the Dark Ages on two different aspects. First, we will focus on the importance of education in the filmic story itself. Second, we argue that on a meta-level these films are also trying to educate the audience.

Education is a central theme in films on the Dark Ages. For example, William of Baskerville in *The Name of the Rose* is responsible for the education of Adso of Melk, Johanna in *Pope Joan* is not only taught by Aesculapius but becomes the teacher of Arn and Arnalda herself, Melius is educating the limp boy Gavin in *The Pied Piper* and Elda in *Le moine et la sorcière*, having been educated by her predecessor, will now teach Agnes to be her own successor. It is remarkable that this education is offered outside the Church. The only official and Christian school that is represented, the Scola in *Pope Joan*, is shown to be a led by a misogynist and closed-minded monk.

The best example of the value of a good education is offered in *Pope Joan*. Born as the daughter of a simple village priest in Ingelheim, Johanna had mental capacities that amazed Aesculapius, the village teacher, who then, regardless of her gender, gave her a proper education. During this education, she proved to be an excellent student, and was allowed at the Cathedral School in Fulda. From there on, although facing many setbacks, she would gradually rise in society to the point where she became the

new Pope. *Pope Joan* offers two additional examples of how education may improve the people's position in society. During her time as a doctor in the abbey of Fulda, one day Johanna met the sick Arn, whom she pitied and took under her care. She not only cured him, but also taught him all her knowledge, which proved to be useful as it helped him to reach an important position at the court of a count. Thanks to Johanna, he rose from the slums around the abbey of Fulda and reached an important position of his own. Later, when Johanna became sick and had to flee the abbey in order not to reveal her true identity, the roles became reversed as now Arn took care of Johanna. During her stay Johanna also taught Arnalda, Arn's daughter, who would rise to the position of Bishop of Paris. Two elements are of importance here. First, with the right education, people can drastically improve their position in society. Second, as mental capacities are not dependent on gender, it leaves a lot more room for female protagonists. In fact also the *philosophe* Condorcet (1743-1794) as well as Jacob Burckhardt were in favour of education for girls (Duce, 1971: 280):

> The Florentine merchant and statesman was often learned in both the classical languages; the most famous humanists read the ethics and politics of Aristotle to him and his sons; e*ven the daughters of the house were highly educated*. It is in these circles that private education was first treated seriously. (Burckhardt, 1958: 148, italics mine)

Arguably, despite the misogyny inherent to the Dark Ages, films on the Dark Ages are more open to women compared to the romanticised constructions of the medieval. Protagonists of the Dark Ages are no hard-bodied heroes who excel in strength, courage, battle skills or loyalty to the king or the nation, but they are artists, lawyers and doctors. This diverges from the traditional medievalist films with a more 'masculine appeal' (Higson, 2009: 203) of which Blanton-Whetsell and Avrich (2000: 4) wrote: 'how often film represents medieval women in secondary roles, usually in the role of damsel in distress, elegant queen/consort, the daughter of a sworn enemy who becomes a marital trophy, or the folkloric Cinderella'. And where an occasional strong woman was depicted, as for example Guinevere in *First Knight*, she became 'subordinated to the male-driven narrative by the end of the film' (Jenkins, 2000: 57-58). Films on the Dark Ages do not focus on the nation ruled by the King and his knights, but on a civil society, which makes it relatively more open towards women. Not coincidentally, in many films women play important roles such as Elda in *Le moine et la sorcière*, Johanna in *Pope Joan*, Béatrice in *La Passion Béatrice*, Mathilda de Mellerby in *Anazapta*, Langiva in *Black Death* or the mute woman in *The Reckoning*.

Films on the Dark Ages also offer examples where it is explicitly shown what may happen if people do not get properly educated. Remarkably, these examples always concern the son of the lord. The misogyny of François de Cortemare in *La Passion Béatrice*, for example, is passed on to Arnaud de Cortemare who is trying to get in the favour of his father. When Arnaud, for example, claimed that the stillborn

baby girl that they met on their way home should not be buried because women have no soul, he is looking to his father as in anticipation to some kind of recognition or a compliment. Similarly, when he and his mother are visiting Béatrice after she has been confined to the tower without food as a punishment by her father, he reacts negatively when he is sent away by his mother. He shouts that 'women are trollops and witches!', to which his mother says to Béatrice that 'his father's words catch in his throat'. In other words, he is taking after his father as nobody is paying attention to his education. This fits with Tavernier's focus to the social conditions and the context that shape the characters in the film into what they are. The same is visible in *Anazapta*, where Sir Walter de Mellerby preferred the battlefield over educating or looking after his nephew Nicholas, who as a result had become a foul-mouthed, self-centred and women-beating brute. In *Le moine et la sorcière*, Etienne de Bourbon's trauma which drove him to be an inquisitor, was due to an event in his youth when his father called him a coward. And although not explicitly linked to the issue of education, in *The Pied Piper* the son of the Baron is an effeminate and warlike character, where in *The Advocate* the son of the lord is an effeminate child-murdering and human-hunting criminal.[49] Finally, also Anastasius in *Pope Joan* is shown to be a self-centred, weak and scheming member of a noble family who only looks after himself and does not care for the people. The reason why the son of the lord often is an effeminate, traumatised or cruel man, is difficult to say. Could it be related to the idea that in a hereditary system people are not elected based upon their capacities to govern? Where in a democracy the mentally unable will most likely not get elected, in a hereditary system the son, gifted or weak, is guaranteed of his place in a system of primogeniture.

In conclusion, these films suggest that by offering the people a good education, this might help them to leave their physical as well as mental deprivation behind and reach important positions in society.

On a meta-level, it could be argued that these films are also educating their audience. Significantly, the form in which the story of most of these films is told is often an educational genre. For example, just as the morality play in *The Reckoning* inspired the people to demand justice, the film itself can be seen as a morality play to inspire its audience to always strive for truth and justice.[50] The story of Johanna's life as told in *Pope Joan*, can be read as a *vita*. As Arnalda tells the audience at the beginning of

[49] In *Morality Play*, the novel on which *The Reckoning* was based, the real culprit behind the rape and murder of the boys of the village was the son of lord De Guise, and not the lord himself as in the film.

[50] It is not quite clear whether or not the film was explicitly aimed to accuse any specific contemporary wrongs in society. Neufeld (2007: 1) read the film in connection to an event where American poets were turned away from the White House for fear they might advocate dissent from governmental foreign policy.

the film: 'so extraordinary a life must not be forgotten'. The way Johanna defended the interests of the common people, and kept faithful to her ideals until her death in the streets of Rome, is presented as an inspirational example.

Le moine et la sorcière was based on the historical exemplum on the holy greyhound by Etienne De Bourbon. The film is not only based on an exemplum, but often refers to other exempla as well. When De Bourbon for example preached in front of the church at the beginning of the film, he tells the exemplum of the little bird that was attracted to the fox because of his beautiful red tongue as a metaphor for being lured into heresy (this exemplum was in fact from Jacques de Vitry's (?-1240) *Sermones Vulgares*; see Davis, 2010: 75; Longere, 1989: 259-269; Schmitt, 1979: 46). More importantly here, however, is the fact that the film also presents itself to be an exemplum. During the film we see how Etienne de Bourbon, at first blinded by his hate due to what he experienced while hunting with his father and by his equally blind faith in the Scriptures, in the end evolves into a more humane and tolerant man. Similarly to Elda, he has learned that the ways of the people are to be respected and not to impose an elite culture upon that is not theirs. At the end of the film, the village priest offers the moral of the story: 'He was a stag, proud of his huge antlers. But he kept tangling them in the bushes. The villagers and Elda helped him free.'

The most direct example of the educational intentions of a film is *Häxan*. While the film starts with a documentary section on the history of witchcraft, in re-release version of the film of 1941, the film opens with Christensen who is directly lecturing the viewer. We will discuss this in the second part of this chapter (see infra, 4.2.1a). Also the children's story *The Pied Piper of Hamelin: A Child's Story* (1842) by Robert Browning on which *The Pied Piper* was based, or the fabliaux, or little fables, on which *The Advocate* was based, are two genres with a clear moral (Ménard, 1983: 10 & 108-142; see also Cobby, 2010: 34-35; Nykrog, 1957: 26-27; Bédier, 1925: 390). This will be discussed in the next chapter (see infra, 5.1.2).

4.2 Witchcraft, medieval medicine and intolerance

In this section we focus on the relation between (medical) science and religion, which is inherently linked to the construct of witchcraft in the cinematic Dark Ages. Although historically speaking witchcraft and witch-hunting are essentially early-modern events, in popular culture a witch burning at the stake is a powerful symbol referring to the Middle Ages as a superstitious, religiously fanatic, misogynist and intolerant age.[51] Traditionally, the witch is a woman who has sealed a pact with the devil, which enables her to perform *maleficium* or harmful sorcery to the Christians in the neighbourhood. During the night she flies on her broom and gathers regularly with other witches during what is known as the Sabbath where they dance, have sex and eat babies (Klaniczay, 2010: 191; Gaskill, 2008: 1069-1088; Obermeier, 2008: 219-229; Tuczay, 2007: 52-68; Roper, 2006: 117-141; Hutton, 2004: 413-434; Briggs, 1996: 298 & 404-405; Smith, 1992: 99-127; Bloch, 1991: 7; Pernoud, 1977: 86-100; Monter, 1972: 435-451). We will analyse how witches are represented in films on the Dark Ages, what their function is and where these images come from. The results indicate that the way witches are represented in films on the Dark Ages is far removed from the abovementioned description and is much indebted to the rationalist and romantic tradition on witchcraft that became dominant in the nineteenth century.

The historical debate on witchcraft only received a boost from the 1970's onwards, and is still heavily debated today. It would lead us too far to give an exhaustive overview on the vast amount of literature on the history of witchcraft (which has been done extensively elsewhere) so we will only give a broad sketch of the elements that make it so complex and challenging to understand. What, for example, made it possible that from 1420 onwards 'witchcraft' became punishable by law, which would lead to mass persecutions which culminated between 1562 and 1630? What were the fundamental changes in the legal system, theology or philosophy that made these trials possible? What was the role of gender related to these accusations? What was the exact definition of a 'witch', compared to a 'demon', 'magic', 'superstition' or 'heresy', which were used during these trials and how did these concepts evolve? Moreover, was it the Church, aided by the Inquisition, that was trying to eradicate heresy and dissent amongst the population and to what degree was it related to the occurrence and the impact of the Reformation? Or were it the

[51] Even when a film is set in a much later time, like *Witchfinder General* (Reeves 1968) which is set in 1654, the tagline on the poster explicitly seeks to connect the events with the Middle Ages: 'As superstition and fear sweep the Middle Ages, an educated rogue named Hopkins (Price) wanders from town to town proclaiming to be an official witch finder. […] There's lots of screaming when there's this much at *stake* [italics mine]' and this is accompanied by the very recognizable images of burning stakes on the poster.

people themselves who were turning their neighbours over to the authorities to be tried as witches and what was the role of the secular authorities herein? Why did some regions in Europe remain unaffected by witch crazes and why were there sometimes long intervals between different witch crazes in regions where these trials did occur? Additionally there is a problem of tainted sources, as there is no evidence coming from the accused people themselves as most records are trial documents written by the clerics involved. The fact that (the threat of) torture was used during the interrogations leads to a general distrust of these documents. And the texts written by theologians, demonologists, or witch-hunters on the matter are also not to be seen as exact reflections of a contemporary reality as Roper (2005: 11 & 125-126) demonstrated that these treatises easily exaggerated the threat of witches and witchcraft in order to emphasise the importance of the function of he who wrote the treatise. This was for example the case for the notorious *Witches Hammer* or *Malleus Maleficarium* (1486) written by the Dominican inquisitor Kramer, who was trying – in vain – to convince the authorities to hire his services. In some cases, these texts even have to be seen as a form of, albeit lurid, entertainment where the horror was emphasised to 'please' the reader (Klaniczay, 2010: 201; Dillinger, 2009: 62-81; Bailey, 2008: 81; Gaskill, 2008: 1069; Obermeier, 2008: 226; Levack, 2007: 147; Davies and Barry, 2007: 1-10; Maxwell-Stuart, 2000, 2007: 11-32; Hutton, 2004; Bailey, 2001; Sullivan, 2000: 343-350; Briggs, 1996: 398 & 405; Cohn, 1993: 16-78 & 144; Ben-Yehuda, 1980; Thomas, 1978; Schoeneman, 1975; Macfarlane, 1970). In other words, there is still a lot of debate on the exact nature of the witch-crazes.

Of more importance here, however, is the fact that during the Middle Ages the concept of what a 'witch' was, still had to be fully developed. It is known that from the twelfth and thirteenth century onwards, as a direct result of the Renaissance of the Twelfth Century when a lot of classical, Hebrew and Arabic texts on the occult were discovered, the clerical authorities started to take magic and *maleficium* more seriously (Bailey, 2002: 125). But it would take until the end of the fifteenth century before a single and unified concept of 'the witch' emerged that could provide the basis for the later witch-crazes (Obermeier, 2008: 219-220; Zika, 2007: 3; Bosky, 2007: 689-722; Waite, 2003: 11-51; Bailey, 2001, 2002: 120; Maxwell-Stuart, 2000; Cohn, 1993: 144-147 & 202). This means, for example, that the historical Bernardo Gui (1261-1331), now more famous as the infamous inquisitor from *The Name of the Rose*, although having been a very important inquisitor, author of the much copied handbook *Practica inquisitionis heretice pravitatis* (compiled between 1321 and 1324) and who was involved in more than a thousand inquires, never accused

anybody of 'witchcraft' as the concept on which the later trials were based was not yet known to him (Bailey, 2001: 967-971).[52]

In this section we will analyse how the witch in films on the Dark Ages is represented and where the imagery and underlying values come from. On this topic there is not much specific literature to be found. Only De la Bretèque in his vast *L'imaginaire médiéval dans le cinéma occidental* (2004: 653-698) devoted a chapter on the representation of medieval witchcraft in the cinema. In this chapter he mainly focused on two different ways in which the story was told. The first, mostly linked to the Scandinavian cinema, was the story on the confrontation between a witch and a monk. The second, which was used by more recent films, tells the story of witchcraft by creating an opposition between fanaticism and tolerance. However, in both cases De la Bretèque focused on what essentially remains the relation between the witch and the church. We will take a different approach and base ourselves upon two nineteenth-century medievalist traditions on representing witchcraft, namely a romantic and a rationalist tradition (Tuczay, 2007: 52-68). Where in the rationalist tradition the conflict is situated between the witch and the church, as mostly described by De la Bretèque, in the romantic tradition the role of the witch as a healer for the people becomes important as well. We will analyse the appearance of witches as well as their meaning in the film according to these traditions.

4.2.1 The innocent victim: the witch in the Rationalist Tradition

> You shall not permit a sorceress to live.
> *Exodus* 22:18 (NKJV)
>
> The Catholic Inquisition published the book that arguably could be called the most blood-soaked publication in human history. *Malleus Maleficarum* - or *The Witches' Hammer* - indoctrinated the world to "the dangers of freethinking women" and instructed the clergy how to locate, torture, and destroy them. Those deemed 'witches' by the Church included all female scholars, priestesses, gypsies, mystics, nature lovers, herb gatherers, and any women 'suspiciously attuned to the natural world.' Midwives also were killed for their heretical practice of using medical knowledge to ease the pain of childbirth - a suffering, the Church claimed, that was God's rightful punishment for Eve's partaking of the Apple of Knowledge, thus giving birth to the idea of Original Sin. During three hundred years of witch hunts, the Church burned at the stake an astounding five million women.
> D. Brown, *The Da Vinci Code*, 2004, p. 173.

[52] In fact, out of 930 sentences, Gui 'only' sent 42 people to the stake (Given, 1989: 353; Yerushalmi, 1970).

One of the most dominant perspectives on the history of witchcraft that resonates to this very day is the rationalist tradition. This tradition originated during the nineteenth century in Germany, with Gottfried Soldan (1803-1869) and Joseph Hansen (1862-1943), and in America with George Lincoln Burr (1857-1938) and Henry Charles Lea (1825-1909) as the main propagators. According to this perspective the history of witchcraft was essentially about the battle between dogmatic religion and scientific reason. In this narrative witch-hunting started during the Middle Ages, became fierce during the Renaissance and the Reformation, reached its peak during the Thirty Year's War (1618-1648) in Germany and knew a gradual decline from the Enlightenment onwards thanks to the emergence of rational thought (Van Liere, 2008: 33; Levack, 2007: 147-149; Tuczay, 2007: 52; Elmer, 2007: 33-51; Wright: 1996: 217-222; Monter, 1972: 535). Two elements of this tradition are especially of importance here. First, it denies the reality of witchcraft and turns it into a 'fantasy and mental aberration' (Sullivan, 2000: 341-342). Either the women believing they were witches were mentally or physically ill, superstitious, or their confessions were made under threat of torture by the inquisition. Second, the trials were mainly seen as a top-down persecution instigated by a dogmatic, misogynist and intolerant Church. The beliefs and perspectives of the church, which led them to persecute these women, have often been symbolised by referring to the *Malleus Maleficarum* or the *Witches Hammer,* made notorious through the work of Joseph Hansen (Levack, 2007: 147; Broedel, 2003). As the accusations of witchcraft were based on this dogmatic and misogynist worldview, the rationalist historians considered the women accused of witchcraft to be innocent of their 'crime' and made them into symbols or victims of an unjust persecution. Not coincidentally, this tradition is linked to a strong anti-clerical sentiment (Gaskill, 2008: 1069; Tuczay, 2007: 57; Elmer, 2007: 34-36).

From a historical perspective, this tradition has long been abandoned. First, as mentioned above, the concept of 'the witch' on which the witch-crazes were based did not exist as such during the Middle Ages. Second, the triumphalist discourse claiming that only after the Enlightenment people discarded the medieval aberration that was witchcraft is undermined by evidence that there were contemporary sceptics as well (see Maxwell-Stuart, 2000: 42-43). Third, this tradition does not take the *perceived* reality of witchcraft seriously and does not explain why even highly educated people at the time believed in the reality of witches or what their opinion on witchcraft was (Klaniczay, 2010: 195). Fourth, there are a lot of hoaxes in the historical data on witchcraft. A notorious example of this are the reports on massive medieval witch-hunts in Southern France where in a very short time hundreds of witches were executed by the Inquisition as for example can be read in Baron Etienne-Léon de Lamothe-Langon's (1786-1864) *Histoire de l'Inquisition* (1829). However, there is no evidence of such witch-crazes and it is now widely accepted that these specific events

never took place. Later historians, however, like for example Soldan, Jansen or Michelet, referred to these stories which they, whether or not linked to their anti-clerical position, happily took for granted. This not only created very powerful stories grasping the people's attention, it also established a strong, but fictive link between the Middle Ages and relentless mass-persecutions that still sounds very familiar to this very day (Tuczay, 2007: 55-56; Briggs, 1996: 404-405).

The echoes of this tradition are still visible in contemporary popular culture as expressed in the films under discussion here. Witchcraft is shown as an anomaly, a symptom of a deranged society characterised by ignorance, dogmatism and violence. In this section we will discuss some examples of this tradition in *Häxan*, *The Seventh Seal*, *The Name of the Rose*, *La Passion Béatrice*, *The Advocate* and *Black Death*.

a) The hysterical witch in Häxan

An early and remarkable example of representing medieval witchcraft in the cinema following the rationalist tradition is *Häxan*, a Swedish funded silent film by Danish director Benjamin Christensen (1879-1959) that premiered in Stockholm on September 18th 1922 (Walker, 2007: 43; Kendrick, 2003; Petrie, 1985: 157). Although strictly speaking not a traditional feature film we included *Häxan* to the corpus as, according to De la Bretèque (2004: 656), it was 'la grande référence du cinéma sur la sorcellerie' for decades.[53]

Häxan is a cross-genre film that offers an extensive study on the historical, religious, social and psychological elements related to the history of witchcraft and the inquisition. The film presents itself at the beginning as 'a presentation from a cultural and historical point of view in 7 chapters of moving pictures'. The film is not a traditional narrative feature film as the seven chapters of the films shift between the documentary genre (chapter I) and historical re-enactments that include representations of dreams and hallucinations as well (Chapters II-VI). Additionally, where the main story-line of the film takes place in 1488, focusing on a witch making potions (chapter II) and the re-enactment of an Inquisition trial from the accusation to the verdict (chapters III-VI), the final chapter (chapter VII) of the film takes place in contemporary society then being the 1920's. Because of this radical new format including different levels of reality, *Häxan* has been called a prototype of the 'surrealist documentary' (Hodson, 2010; see also De la Bretèque, 2004: 658). It is a

[53] Dreyer admired the film, which influenced *La Passion de Jeanne d'Arc* (Petrie, 1985: 158). Kendrick (2003) even insinuates that there is no coincidence between the re-release of *Häxan* in 1941 and Dreyer's *Vredens Dag* (*Day of Wrath*, 1943) which appeared two years later.

remarkably dark and explicit horror film, in a chiaroscuro lighting characteristic of Christensen (Lunde, 2010: 9; Petrie, 1985: 157 & 159; Baxter, 1976: 62).

Besides its idiosyncratic form the film also bears a very personal mark from its director Christensen. Not only did he play several roles in the film himself, as for example both Satan and Jesus on the cross, the opening shot of the film is one of Christensen himself who addresses the audience directly (through the intertitles and referring to himself as 'I'). He starts by thanking Johan Ankerstjerne for his work on the photography of the film and Richard Louw for the art direction. Next he informs the viewer of the intent of the film: 'Let us look into the history of mysticism and try to explain the mysterious chapter known as the Witch'. Immediately thereafter the audience is shown a slideshow with a lot of explanatory intertitles which essentially makes the film a mediated lecture during which he also points out with a pencil where his audience should look. In line with his claim of offering a presentation from a cultural and historical point of view, Christensen sees himself as a propagator of scientific historical knowledge and explicitly aims to educate his audience (De la Bretèque, 2004: 656). At the beginning of the film he informs his audience where his main sources can be found ('in the theatre's playbill') and also throughout the film he often refers to other sources such as the 'French doctors Bourneville and Teinturier' who gave him pictures of a Witch Sabbath, the French historian Lacroix with a representation of the medieval worldview or books he read such as *Rites and Rights in the German Past* by Franz Heinemann and the *History of Customs* by Edward Fuchs. In 1941, with the re-release of the film Christensen's pedagogical intentions were again reinforced by adding a short introduction (8'10") to the film in which he lectures to a supposed classroom wearing a white jacket giving him scientific allure (Sharpe, 2011: 85).

Just as *The Birth of a Nation* received contemporary praise for being 'history with lightning' while now being considered to be an overtly racist film, it is now very clear that despite the scientific claims of Christensen the film is much indebted to the rationalist tradition. From the very beginning witchcraft is presented as a symptom of superstition and ignorance. As the film teaches its audience: 'When primitive man is confronted with something incomprehensible, the explanation is always sorcery and evil spirits' or 'the result of naïve notions about the mystery of the universe' (as e.g the monks in *The Name of the Rose*). And although these superstitions were already visible in ancient Persia, the most notorious pages in the history of witchcraft were written during the Middle Ages.[54] It was then that the 'evil spirits of ancient times' changed into 'devils, sneaking around and tempting children' with disastrous results:

[54] Remarkably, in his introduction the rerelease of *Häxan* in 1941 when Christensen was discussing the fourth category of witches, he mentions that the persecution lasted *until* the *beginning* of the Renaissance (italics mine). It would seem that he confused the Renaissance with the Enlightenment in the rationalist discourse.

> To understand where they [the witch trials] stemmed from we must remember that they took place in a dark and unenlightened age, both spiritually and intellectually. Anxiety about Hell and fear of the Devil, constantly pressured people's lives during those times.

This would lead to what Christensen called in his introduction to the re-release of *Häxan* in 1941 as 'one of the biggest catastrophes in the history of mankind'. In order to illustrate this point, he claims that 'in the arc of a few centuries, over 8 million women, men and children were burned as witches'. This dramatically high number would corroborate his thesis, but although there is a lot of debate on the exact number of deaths, currently there is a consensus on around 100.000 witch trials that resulted in approximately 60.000 death sentences.[55]

From chapter II till VI *Häxan* offers its viewer a wide variety on what witches were. In his introduction to the re-release of *Häxan* in 1941 Christensen divides them into four categories which we will follow here.[56] In line with the rationalist tradition, he also explains to his audience why these women weren't *real* witches.

First, there was the 'professional witch' who, thanks to her knowledge of plants made potions. This does not make her a healer, as we will see in the romantic tradition, as she also made ointments that the witches needed to rub themselves in with in order to fly at night. However, according to Christensen, the fact that these women thought they could fly was probably due to the hallucinating effects of the plants they used.

Second, there were the old women of the streets who drew attention to themselves as they suffered from some physical disfigurement which made them look strange. As the film claims: 'A time when being different was dangerous, being a hunchback, a deformed eye, trembling hands, … could be enough to be condemned as a witch'.

Third, many women, this time also including middle class women, were accused of witchcraft due to the perverse procedures followed by the Inquisition. As witches were believed to operate in group, for every witch that the Inquisition questioned, they demanded the names of ten other witches (in the film version of 1941 this even became *twenty* other witches). Facing the threat of torture, these women gave ten names which led to an unstoppable chain of accusations. In chapter

[55] There is a lot debate on the exact numbers of deaths as a direct result of witch-trials. In the eighteenth century the number of deaths as a direct result from these trials would mount to 9 million, but the later the research the more the number declined. According to Ben-Yehuda (1980: 1), between the 'early decades of the fourteenth century [!] until 1650' there were between 200.000 and 500.000 executions. According to Brian Levack (followed by Bailey, 2001: 960), there were approximately 110.000 with trials which resulted in about 60.000 executions in the sixteenth and seventeenth century, mostly in what is now Germany. Wright (1996: 220) writes over 100.000 executed witches. Toivo (2007: 100) mentions 100.000 to 200.000 trials, but only 40.000 to 50.000 death sentences.

[56] We have changed the order of the witches, numbers three and four have switched position.

VI of *Häxan*, the audience is shown a wide variety of gruesome torture instruments after which Christensen rhetorically adds:

> 'You and I would also be driven to confess mysterious talents with the help of such tools. Isn't that so? […] One of my actresses insisted on trying the thumbscrew when we shot these pictures. I will not reveal the terrible confessions I forced from the young lady in less than a minute'.

Fourth, and most important to Christensen, witchcraft could also be explained as a medical condition. More specifically he followed the link that was being made in the early twentieth century between witchcraft and hysteria that provided an explanation for all kinds of so-called religious experiences ranging from possessions to ecstasy (Elmer, 2007: 35; Spanos, 1978: 417-420). Hysteria was shortly before discovered and described by the French doctor Jean-Martin Charcot (1825-1893), the famous *médecin en chef* of the equally famous Parisian Salpêtrière hospital between 1862 and 1893. Although this disease today has become very uncommon, it was very much en vogue at the end of the end of the nineteenth century as occurring amongst females (Micale, 1993: 497). Although Christensen in his opening text referred to 8 million women as well as *men and children* who were burned, it is clear that in practice he kept the gendered aspect of witchcraft (Kendrick, 2003).

Not coincidentally, the seventh and last chapter of *Häxan* takes place in contemporary society where we see how women are still possessed by the devil, demonstrate religious ecstasy or hallucinate, but where it is now understood as a medical condition. Just as Evans used the history on animal trials to praise the contemporary state of criminology, which was echoed without the contemporary pendant in *The Advocate*, Christensen praised modern (medical) science as opposed to medieval ignorance (for Evans, see supra, 3.2.4, pp. 103-104). For this he offered modern medical answers to medieval issues as for example the insensitive spots on the skin which were considered to be 'The Devil's Mark' and formed irrefutable evidence of witchcraft. However, as the research by Régnard, a psychiatrist at the school of Charcot, pointed out, these spots were merely symptoms of hysteria (Spanos, 1978: 431-432). The film emphasises the difference between the medieval and the modern by juxtaposing scenes where a medieval pricker is maliciously looking for 'The Devil's Spot' with a modern doctor diagnosing a woman of hysteria based upon the same insensitive spots on her skin. As the montage suggests, where women used to be burned because of these marks, now they get treated. Times have changed for the good when religion no longer 'prevented a rational development of medical psychology' (Zilboorg, 1931: 610). As Christensen concluded: 'In the Middle Ages you were in conflict with the Church, now it is with the law.'

Characteristic of the rational tradition, this makes *Häxan* essentially an anti-clerical film. The sources on which the film is based are telling of the position the film

takes. First, the Salpêtrière hospital at the end of the nineteenth century was a stronghold of medical avant-gardism and modernism and was active in the fight between church and state that was fought fiercely in France. For example, Charcot's student Bourneville was a fervent anti-cleric who fought for the laicisation of hospitals and asylums by replacing the staff by trained and licensed nurses (Micale, 1985: 703-713). Second, the visual material on which Christensen based himself was no neutral choice as well.[57] He extensively based himself on the *Malleus Maleficarum* or *The Witches' Hammer* by the Dominican Inquisitor Heinrich Kramer. It is now known that the work exaggerated the description of witches, the threat they posed to society and that the book was ignored for more than a century after it appeared (Herzig, 2010; Gaskill, 2008: 1077; Roper, 2006: 121-126; Waite, 2003: 42-45; Bailey, 2002: 120; Sullivan, 2000: 337-339). However, Christensen took it at face value. According to Tybjerg (2001) he even set the story of the film in 1488 as the *Malleus* appeared in 1486, thereby creating a direct link between the book and its presumed consequences. Also other illustrations, as for example the ones he uses to depict the cruelty of the torture during the interrogations, are not coincidently chosen. The illustration of Abraham Palingh, for example, *Het afgerukt mom-aangezicht der Tooverye* (1659) is an illustration that can be found in the work of Régnard of the school of Charcot.[58] Another picture, which 'speaks for itself', where a man lies motionless on the floor under the title 'after the interrogation', clearly intended to denounce the barbarity of torture. Third, according to De la Bretèque (2004: 656), the fact that Christensen lived in a Lutheran country that considered witchcraft as something that happened before the Reformation also attributed to the anti-clerical mood of *Häxan*.

Yet, the film wanted to do more than merely the retelling the history of witchcraft – and glorifying modernity. Christensen also wanted to warn its viewers for still existing superstition, or more specifically educate them into more rational thinking:

> Centuries have passed and the Almighty of medieval times no longer sits in his tenth sphere. We no longer sit in church staring terrified at the frescoes of the devils. The witch no longer flies away on her broom over the rooftops. But isn't superstition still rampant among us? Is there an obvious difference between the sorceress and her customer then and now? We no longer burn our old and poor. But do they not often suffer bitterly? And the little woman, whom we call hysterical, alone and unhappy, isn't she still a riddle for us? Nowadays we detain the unhappy in a mental institution or – if she is wealthy – in a modern clinic. And then we will console ourselves with the notion that the mildly temperate shower of the clinic has replaced the barbaric methods of medieval times. [contrasting shot of three burning witches]

[57] Troels-Lund fourtheen-volume *Daily Life in the Nordic Countries in the Sixteenth Century as a main historical source* (1879-1901), is also representative of the rationalist tradition.

[58] Paul-Marie-Léon Régnard, *Les maladies épidémiques de l'esprit: sorcellerie, magnétisme, morphinisme, délire des grandeurs: Ouvrage illustré de cent vingt gravures* (Paris, E. Plon Nourrit et cie, 1887).

This plea for rationality and tolerance has recently been slightly overshadowed by a discussion on presumed anti-Semitic references in *Häxan*. Studying the music that accompanied the film as it premiered on September 18th 1922, Gillian Anderson (2001) discovered that during the scene on the Black Mass the *Kol Nidrei*, one of the most sacred pieces of music for the Jews, was played in the version of Max Bruch.

> *Kol Nidrei*'s importance within the Jewish calendar, its notability in the music world as a marker of Jewishness, and its popularity in silent cinema halls all create anti-Semitic underscoring when playing next to *Häxan*'s images of Black Masses and baby killings. Music and image together connect to folk-tales about Jews desecrating Christian practices and killing Christian children. These overtones change the scene from one of morbid spectacle to one of anti-Semitic exhibition. (Walker, 2007: 49)

However, the question is whether this was meant as 'gratuitous anti-Semitism' as Anderson (2001) implies, or, as Alison Tara Walker (2007: 49) interpreted it, as an implicit nod to the anti-Semitism of Christensen's world. In the latter case, is to be taken as a warning that some of these elements still exist today: 'even though *Häxan* attempts to distance itself from the medieval period by presenting the Middle Ages as a time filled with superstitious and irrational beliefs, the film's soundtrack reveals that "medieval" suspicions still plague modernist practices through continued use of anti-Semitic folklore'.

b) The witch as an innocent victim

Contrary to *Häxan*, in most films the role of the witch following the rationalist tradition is much more restricted. It is a secondary character who seems to function mostly as a victim or as a symptom of feudal or clerical dogmatism, superstition and intolerance. She is a powerful symbol of what is wrong with the medieval age.

In his quest for a last meaningful act in life, Antonius Block in *The Seventh Seal* encounters a young girl chained to a pole outside the chapel where Block confessed to Death and Jöns spoke to the painter. A guard tells Block that she is a witch who had intercourse with the devil while he throws bile and blood of a big black dog around her 'to keep the devil away'. More specifically she is accused of having brought the plague to the land. The young girl, however, is clearly out of her senses. Only later during the film, just after the death of Skat, Block and Jöns encounter the same girl who is now being transported to the parish' border in order to be burned. Just before her execution Block tries to talk to her about the devil, who surely must have knowledge of God. However, although she claims to see the devil constantly, Block only sees the fear in her eyes. Although she had sought the devil, she has not found him and the last thing she will see on this earth is emptiness. Her youth, beauty and innocence contrast heavily with the brutal way she is executed by the Church. She

forms the third example, after the snatching theologian who called for a crusade and the fear-instilling flagellants, of the superstition of a Church that is mostly responsible for creating an atmosphere of fear and terror. The execution of the witch forms an unbearable sight for Block and Jöns, the two modern protagonists, to watch (Gado, 1986: 203). According to De la Bretèque (2004: 685) this scene 'à laissé le souvenir le plus marquant et l'image la plus convaincante de la sorcière médiévale et de la persécution dont elle a été l'objet'. In other words, the two scenes of the witch function as a symbol or an alienating device that repels the viewer and distances him from the dark age the film is set in (for a historical view on Swedish witch-trials, see Paden, 1998: 300-301; Donner, 1975: 152-153). According to Finke and Shichtman (2010: 319) the burning of the witch was even meant to resemble the crucifixion, referring to Jesus as essentially another innocent victim of a wrongful persecution. In light of the tradition as discussed above on *Häxan*, this scene led film critic Dilys Powell (1975: 55) to write in *The London Sunday Times* of March 9th 1958 on *The Seventh Seal* that 'whenever Scandinavian cinema has five minutes to fill, it burns a witch'.

Also in *The Name of the Rose* the witch is used as a ready-made concept aimed at generating instant meaning of dogmatic intolerance as well as glaring injustice. In this film a young girl who sells her body in exchange for food is accused of being a witch after she has been discovered together with simpleton monk Salvatore. He has knocked over a burning candle during a satanic ritual he instigated to gain the love of the girl. To their misfortune, earlier that night the inquisitor Bernardo Gui arrived at the abbey and is called to the scene. There he demonstrates the dogmatic reasoning of the Church. As he finds a girl, a monk, a black cat and a black cockerel, which he considers to be objects of the devil as well as irrefutable evidence of their guilt, he needs no further time to reflect. Although he only just arrived at the abbey and is thus unaware of the specific conditions and circumstances he immediately deduces that the girl is a witch who was trying to seduce the monk by means of a satanic ritual. The contrast with reality is made by Adso who tells his master, and thus reminds the audience, that she did it for the food, not for the devil. By means of this relatively short sequence the character of Bernardo Gui is effectively introduced to the audience. Following De la Bretèque (2004: 663-664), Annaud, the director of the film, in fact relied on 'l'imagerie la plus traditionelle' to make his point. Just as in *The Seventh Seal* the witch serves a way to denounce the ways of the Church. Also the way in which she is brought to the screen, with the use of claire-obscure, surrounded by deformed faces in a general atmosphere not far from a horror film, reminded De la Bretèque of the Scandinavian tradition.

When Osmund, Ulric and the band of soldiers in *Black Death* travel through the plague stricken lands, they arrive at a village where the people are in a state of frenzy. A woman is accused of bringing the plague to the lands and is to burn for it. In this

particular case, and befitting the extremely grim atmosphere of the film, Ulric frees the girl and then kills her with his sword as an act of mercy. Peculiar to this representation is that the woman was not accused by the Church, but by her fellow townspeople.[59] However, later in the film, a fellow soldier of Ulric refers to events that are clearly related to the rationalist tradition. During the night, he tells the story of how a village in the north 'burnt 128 witches in one night, sixteen an hour for eight hours. By the time the night was through, they killed every woman in the village.' This version lies in the tradition of the hoaxes as created by Baron Etienne-Léon de Lamothe-Langon's *Histoire de l'Inquisition* (1829) which was used by Soldan (Tuczay, 2007: 55-56) after which it became ingrained in popular memory. These examples of witchcraft in *Black Death* are to be seen as a symptom of the inherent violence in the medieval system. But ironically, and related to the genre of the film, while these stories on the witch crazes are used as a way to implicitly denounce the Dark Ages, the viewer can relish in its gore.

The Advocate, next to the portrayal of animal trials as a common medieval occurrence, focuses on one case of witchcraft. In the film, Jeanne Martin is accused of *maleficium* or 'causing harm through supernatural means' (Baily, 2001: 962; Horsely, 1979: 690). When Courtois visits her in prison, she has been tortured and she repeats to Courtois what she thinks he will want to hear. She tells him that she is guilty and has suckled Lucifer with her third nipple which has been seen as the Devil's Mark. However, Courtois' rational mindset recognises it as a torture mark, a burning 'in the second and the third degree'. His rational approach to the case will eventually acquit her from guilt from a civil court, but only moments later, the jury changes from the one moment to next from being a civil court into being an ecclesiastical court. Before Courtois realises what has happened, she is accused of witchcraft and sentenced to death. It is what Pincheon, the country lawyer, refers to as 'custom and practice' instead of the clear rationality of Roman Law and another example of the unjust medieval legal system. This situation is later even made more unjust as the local priest, father Albertus, as a member of the clergy confesses to Courtois that there is no such thing as witchcraft, but refused to say this for his own comfort:

> *Albertus:* As long as I live, I'll not believe a woman can fly through the air like a blackbird or a hawk and when the poor creature lies down in her bed to sleep, the enemy who never sleeps comes to her side to call up illusions before her. He does it so subtlety that she thinks she does… what she only dreams she does. She might dream she goes for a ride on a broom or a beam, but there's neither broom nor beam can hold her. Father Ignatius proved there was not a single case of

[59] This lies close to Briggs' (1996: 398-405) theory in his book W*itches and Neighbours. The Social and Cultural Context of European Witchcraft* where his thesis was that most accusations were made by acquaintances of the witch and emphasised the importance of 'interpersonal relationships'. This approach diverges significantly from the more traditional top-down persecution by the Inquisition. This can also be seen in *Monty Python and the Holy Grail*, here not under discussion, where it were the villagers who were bringing a woman accused of witchcraft to trial (Toivo, 2007: 96-97).

witchcraft in 50 years in Arras based on any real evidence. They burnt him too of course.

Courtois: Would you say all that in court?

Albertus: Richard, I like it here. It's a very nice living. Having my balls burnt off in public might take some of the pleasure out of it.

In the divide between the countryside as the medieval and the city as modernity witchcraft is clearly a symbol of the countryside. As Pincheon says to Courtois at the end of the trial: 'Not a great deal of witchery in the city eh, Courtois'. The witch in *The Advocate* is the clearest example of medieval injustice, and her execution will in fact be the catalyst for the coming of the reckoning for medieval society (see infra, 5.1.2b).

In conclusion, these witches all follow the rationalist tradition as a symbol for injustice. They are hysterical, delirious or just normal women who happen to be in the wrong place at the wrong time. All films deny the reality of witchcraft, and the witches themselves are used as symbols to reinforce the already negative evaluation of the church and the medieval world in general.

4.2.2 'L'unique médecin du peuple': the Witch in the Romantic Tradition

> 'D'où date la Sorcière?' Je dis sans hésiter: 'Des temps du désespoir.' Du désespoir profond que fit le monde de l'Eglise. Je dis sans hésiter: 'La Sorcière est son crime'.
>
> J. Michelet, *La Sorcière*, 1862 (1966), p. 35.

At the basis of the romantic tradition in representing medieval witchcraft stands the French nineteenth-century historian Jules Michelet (1798-1874) and his hugely influential *La Sorcière* (1862), a monograph completely devoted to the history of witchcraft.[60] Although the romantic tradition shares many elements with the rationalist tradition, such as denying the reality of *maleficium* or the strong anticlerical drive, Michelet related medieval witchcraft to two of his most favourite historical subjects: medieval peasantry and women. He considered the Sabbath to be an expression of rebellion of disgruntled medieval peasants against their feudal lord, and, what would prove to be a much more enduring and influential construct, turned the medieval witch not only into a wise woman of the woods, but also into a healer for the people and even history's first modern scientist. It is widely accepted that Michelet, then sixty-four years old, wrote *La Sorcière* with more passion than based on historical research as it took him for example only two days to write the last two chapters. As a contemporary English translator already remarked in the preface to his translation of what significantly became *The Witch of the Middle Ages* (1863) 'the true

[60] We will only focus on the first part of the book which deals with medieval witchcraft.

history of Witchcraft has yet to be written by some cooler hand'.[61] However, the medieval world created by Michelet in *La Sorcière* proved to be hugely popular and most enduring as it is still visible in recent films on the Dark Ages.

In the previous chapter Michelet's love for the people, as the true representatives of France, has already been discussed. In line with the Romantic movement, which started with Herder (1744-1803), he also took the culture and world of the peasants seriously and evaluated it positively. This tradition, linked with a nationalist drive, considered witchcraft as an authentic part of peasant culture, making witchcraft something to be treasured. Sir Walter Scott (1771-1832), for example, described the Scottish practices related to witchcraft in his *Letters on Demonology and Witchcraft* (1830). More influential was Jacob Grimm's (1785-1863) *Deutsche Mythologie* (1835) where he evolved from the wicked old witch, as for example in *Hansel und Gretl* and other fairy tales collected by him and his brother Wilhelm in their *Kinder- und Hausmärchen* (1812-1815), to the concept of the innocent women who was persecuted by the Church because she still knew the authentic pre-Christian pagan and Germanic culture. Here the notion of the wise-woman of the woods was created: an ancient intermediary between the divine and the earth (Shen, 2008: 20-25).

Contemporary adversaries of witchcraft had often considered these witches, and the accompanying Sabbath, to be devil-worshippers who had to be persecuted by the church. This vision, however, was linked to the impact of the French Revolution where any hidden secret society was seen as a threat and a potentially destabilising factor to the nation (Tuczay, 2007: 55; Briggs, 1996: 4). As an adherent of the Revolutionary ideals, Michelet reversed this threatening concept of witchcraft and made a positive thing of the Sabbath as being an anti-authoritative meeting. For him, the Sabbath, or the 'messe noire' consisted of disgruntled peasants who gathered in the woods to give symbolical expression of rebellion against the oppression of the feudal system dancing and mocking the lords and the priests. Michelet imagined that the songs that these serfs sung at the occasion would be 'la Marseillaise de ce temps', thereby clearly considering these Sabbaths as a foreshadowing of the Revolution (Michelet, 1966: 123-131).

Influenced by Grimm's concept of the wise woman of the woods (Rearick, 1971: 79; Kaegi, 1936: 64-81 & 195-221), in Michelet's theory these Sabbaths were also presided by a wise woman of the woods, but Michelet made her into more than only that. According to him, women, more than medieval men, were the victims of the feudal oppression as symbolised in the *droit de cuissage*, and women were more targeted by a misogynist church as symbolised in the notorious *Malleus Maleficarum*.

[61] Michelet, J. (1863) *The Witch of the Middle Ages*. [Translated by L.J. Trotter]. London: Simpkin, Marshall, and co.

Michelet (1966: 31) quoted from the *Malleus* at the very beginning of *La Sorcière* saying that 'Il faut dire *l'hérésie des sorcières*, et non des sorciers; ceux-ci sont peu de chose'.[62] In other words, next to the feudal oppression it was the Church's virulent misogynist aggression which made women even more repressed to the point where they desperately had to flee society and find refuge the woods. There, Michelet created a concept of the witch that was unique and still is influential today, which assumes a link between the wise women of the woods and medicine (Séginger, 2009: 527-528 & 537; Gaskill, 2008: 1070; Shen, 2008: 25-30; Tuczay, 2007: 53-55; Cohn, 1993: 148-152; Rearick, 1971: 73 & 85; Viallaneix, 1966: 16-18).

As the women were now living in the woods they were freed from the dogma's and prescriptions of the church, which enabled them too look freely upon nature as it really was. This, according to Michelet, turned them into the first modern scientists. Already in 1854 in the introduction of his *Histoire de France* devoted to the sixteenth century, entitled *L'Agonie du Moyen Age*, Michelet had rallied against what he saw as a lack of science during the Middle Ages and it would take until the sixteenth century for 'la découverte de la terre et du ciel' (Michelet, 1990: 30-32; Mettra, 1990: 5-23).[63] In *La Sorcière*, he again fiercely criticised the non-existence of science during the Middle Ages and lay the responsibility entirely with the church. As the Church preferred to debate on the gender of angels, they dogmatically believed that all truths were to be found in the Scriptures, there was no need for additional sciences such as chemistry, mathematics or physics. And as the Church considered nature to be 'impure et suspecte' their worldviews were 'artificial' and 'anti-nature' (Michelet, 1966: 30, 32, 39, 45-46, 53-60 & 284). The witch, on the other hand, bound by nothing else but what nature showed her, was one with nature: 'La femme est encore au monde ce qui est le plus nature' (Michelet, 1966: 101). Symbolical of the distinction between the scientific witch and the dogmatic Church was medicine (Michelet, 1996: 105-113; see also Cottille-Foley, 2010: 47-53; Séginger, 2009: 530-533; Shen, 2008: 26 & 29; Rearick, 1971: 76-84):

> Mais la grande révolution que font les sorcières, le plus grand pas *à rebours* contre l'esprit du moyen âge, c'est ce qu'on pourrait appeler la réhabilitation du ventre et des fonctions digestives. Elles professèrent hardiment: 'Rien d'impur et rien d'immonde.' L'étude de la matière fut dès lors illimitée, affranchie. La médicine fut possible. […] Rien d'impur que la mal moral. Toute chose physique est pure; nulle ne peut être éloignée du regard et de l'étude, interdite par un vain spiritualisme, encore moins par un sot dégoût. (Michelet, 1966: 112)

[62] Michelet quotes Jacob Sprenger as the author of the *Malleus*. It is now believed that the *Malleus* reflects the opinions of Kramer and that Sprenger's role as co-author was minimal (Broedel, 2003: 18-19). See Michelet (1966: 151-160) for his attack on the *Malleus*.

[63] In this work he already devoted a short section to the history of witchcraft (Michelet, 1990: 106-123).

Where the medicine of the Church essentially consisted of prayers, resignation and hoping for a swift death to take people to a better afterlife, as is demonstrated in the speech at the beginning of *The Reckoning*, the witch could offer life. She defied the medieval dark and ignorant times, and as a modern Prometheus gave medicine and relief to the people. While this made her an enemy of the priests, she was Nature's Priestess (Michelet, 1966: 32).

Where the concept of the Sabbath as an expression of anti-feudal sentiments amongst the peasants did not prove to be that influential, Michelet's concept of the witch proved to be enduring. First, we will discuss more direct echoes of Michelet's witch in the cinema as for example in *Le moine et la sorcière*, *The Reckoning* and *La Passion Béatrice*.[64] Second, we will broaden the scope to discuss pagan, Jewish and Arab medicine in relation to Christian medicine. Here as well the ideas of Michelet prove to be influential.[65]

a) The witch and the people

> L'unique médecin du people, pendant mille ans, fut la Sorcière. Les empereurs, les rois, les papes, les plus riches barons, avaient quelques docteurs de Salerne, des Maures, des Juifs, mais la masse de tout état, et l'on peut dire le monde, ne consultait que la *Saga* ou *Sage-femme*.
>
> J. Michelet, *La sorcière*, 1862 (1966), p. 33.

Contrary to the rationalist witch as a victim of an ignorant and intolerant church, in the romantic tradition the witch is inherently connected to the people. Driven out of society by either the church or the local lords, she now lives in the woods as a healer for the people. The clearest example of this is the character of Elda in *Le moine et la sorcière*. During her interrogation by the inquisitor Etienne de Bourbon, she tells that at the age of sixteen she was happily betrothed to a man from another village until the local lord came to claim his *droit de cuissage*. Her fiancée tried to stop the guards from taking her, but he was killed in the fight that followed upon it. Elda was then taken to

[64] *La Sorcière* has also been the 'inspirational core' of *Glissmenents progressifs du Plaisir* (Robbe-Grillet 1974) on a 'liberated individual against the taboo of society' which will lead to an accusation of witchcraft by the church. However, as this film is not set during the Middle Ages, it will not be addressed here (see Michalczyk, 1977).

[65] Although the romantic tradition on representing witchcraft shows similarities with Margaret Murray's thesis, in her well known *The Witch-cult in Western Europe* (1921), that witchcraft was 'a survival of a pre-Christian religion in Western Europe' and a 'Dianic fertility cult' which may have first emerged in Egypt, we argue that the romantic witches in films on the Dark Ages are constructed according to Michelet's concept of the witch (Murray, 1963: 4; see also Waite, 2003: 6; Cohn, 1993: 152-160; Monter, 1972: 437-439).

the lord and raped. When she became pregnant the Church would not stand for this unlawful child which meant she no longer had a place in Christian society. As a solution, her mother brought Elda to live with the wise women of the woods in order to be educated and eventually to take her place. Not coincidentally, the film suggests that Elda, in turn, is going to be succeeded by Agnes, the child that was the result of Etienne raping a peasant girl. In a world full of feudal abuses, continuity amongst the wise women of the woods is ensured.

Following the concept of Michelet, the wise woman of the woods is also a healer, knowledgeable of the medicinal qualities of plants, who puts her abilities in the service of the people. This ability is put in strong contrast with the Church, or more specifically the village priest, who only has prayers, holy water and relics to offer as a cure. For example, a woman in the film tells Etienne de Bourbon that once she took her sick daughter to the village priest who tried to heal the girl by using Saint Andrew's Relic and Holy Water which proved to be ineffective. When shortly thereafter she took her daughter to Elda, she was cured. A similar story is told by a man who suffered from a lot of pain in his legs, but despite his prayers to Saint Taurin the pain did not go away. The berry juice he got from Elda, on the other hand, worked perfectly. When the children of the village got sick by the ponds constructed by the count in order to raise carps, it was she who healed the children. This puts her in high esteem amongst the villagers. Therefore, when the small village is disturbed by an Inquisitor who tries to impose his elite culture which brings him into conflict with Elda, nobody of the villagers is willing to collaborate. As the village priest tells Etienne: 'The village who slanders her would be like the viper who bites the hand that feeds it'.

In line with the reading of the film as suggested above, by accusing Elda of witchcraft and sentencing her to the stake she becomes the symbol of a (female) minority who is oppressed by the dominant, patriarchal, elite and clerical culture (see supra, 4.1.2). Historically, however, the medical knowledge shown in the film was known and accepted by the Church as it can be found in contemporary clerical writings (Stoertz, 2000: 39; Bouchard, 2000: 43). But by making Elda medically superior to the Church, and accusing her of witchcraft at the end of the film instead of the historical accusation of 'orgueil' and 'superstition', the film is constructing a witch that is related to the construct of Michelet. As Sydam (2000: 48-49) wrote, by making 'orgeuil' and 'superstition' into 'heresy' and 'witchcraft' the film also avoids the confusion with our modern concept of 'superstition' which would be attributed to the church rather than Elda, but we argue that this shift in meaning is also resonating Michelet. Just as Schmitt was focusing on the *longue durée* in the folklore on the holy greyhound, the witch of Michelet is also an invisible force in history linked with the people who offered resistance to the feudal elite. This resiliency amongst the people would eventually culminate in the Revolution offering their freedom (Séginger, 2009:

542; Rearick, 1971: 87). It is remarkable, however, that according to De la Bretèque (2004: 660) Shiffman said that she only read Michelet after the film was made. It remains unclear whether or not this construct came from Pamela Berger, or was unconsciously used in the film to construct the character of Elda.

Additionally, where in films on the Dark Ages the implicit grand narrative of progress is a dominant element to attribute meaning to these films, in this film there is also evidence of more nostalgic return to nature. The close relation between Elda and her plants and nature attested according to Shoeltz (2007: 165) to a 'loss of connection to nature' in contemporary society we now miss. From this perspective, critics have linked this film to the 'American New Wave interest in nature mysticism' (Bouchard, 2000: 42; see also Bitel, 2000: 54).[66]

The mute woman in *The Reckoning*, who is falsely accused of the murder of Thomas Wells (similarly to the mute Agnes in *Le moine et la sorcière*), can be seen as a secular version of the construct of Michelet. As the father of the accused woman told Martin, the leader of the travelling artists, during his detective work she was a healer with quite a repute amongst the people. This gave her influence over the people which the local lord considered to be a potential threat to his position. Her father warned her that the authorities 'would find a way to bring her before the judges'. When lord De Guise's fifth victim was found, causing a stir in the village, he saw his chance not only to shift the blame to her but also to remove this potentially dangerous woman. When she is saved at the very last moment from the noose, thanks to the play by the artists which caused the revolution in the village, we see her between the villagers in a prominent position, reminiscent of *La Liberté Guidant le Peuple*, a clear example of her influence and important position in the village society (see supra, 3.3.2a).

Two things are peculiar to this representation of the woman in *The Reckoning*. First, she is never directly called a witch in the film and she is not sought after by the clergy for reasons of witchcraft. Nonetheless, she has been repeatedly and explicitly recognised by the critics as a 'witch' as her actions or position in the film seem to trigger this concept (e.g. Ebert, 2004; Loewenstein, 2004 in *Variety*; Papamichael, 2004 for the BBC). Second, it could be argued that the filmmakers were looking to trigger this meaning as the character of the accused woman is significantly changed compared to the character in the novel *Morality Play* (1995) by Barry Unsworth on which the film was based. In the novel, the role of the woman is only marginal as in reality the authorities were trying to capture her father. But as he was not at home at the moment, they took his daughter, thereby turning her into an innocent victim. The father in the novel was not a healer but a man with heretical beliefs similar to those of

[66] This American link can be related to Pamela Berger, an art historian at Boston College. It was she who wanted to turn the story of Etienne de Bourbon into film for which she approached Suzanne Schiffman (see supra, 2.2.3, pp. 66-67).

Salvatore and Remigio in *The Name of the Rose*. He was related to 'The Children of the Spirit' and preached against the rich and the priests, which gave him the influence amongst the people which made him a threat for lord de Guise (Unsworth, 1955: 133). For this reason, he was accused of killing Thomas Wells:

> They have wanted to take me for years past because I speak against the monks and friars and especially against the Benedictines, most slothful and debauched of all. This Simon Damian is a minister of Hell, he serves the Lord and helps him to live delicately on our labours and goods. We starve while they feast, we groan while they dance. […] They will be put to the fire, with their hounds and horses and their whores that they feed and clothe from our labours. (Unsworth, 1995: 124)

In the novel he revolts against the clerical dogma that man's nature is corrupt since the Fall of Eden, which can only be redeemed by the Church ('Ex ecclesiam nulla salus', Unsworth, 1995: 122). The father believes that man is strong enough to redeem himself, turning the church into an obsolete institution. In the film the role of the father and daughter are fundamentally different. *The Reckoning* makes the daughter into a healer which gives her the reputation feared by the lord. Here it is the father who claims that men's nature is corrupt and that his daughter is blasphemous as she 'lays on hands and claims that God himself speaks through them'. However, he always remained a loving father as he warned his daughter for the danger she was in and is heartbroken the day of her execution.[67] In conclusion, the film created a more recognisable character by making her into a witch rather than focusing on a heretical father as in the novel. Related to Michelet's concept of witchcraft, emphasising the witch's influence over the people and the medicinal knowledge she offers to the people, *The Reckoning* makes her a threat to the lords. As the film is set during a transitional period, the Revolution will set the people free (see supra, 3.3.2a).

Near the end of *La Passion Béatrice*, when Béatrice has decided to take action against her father, she goes to the girl who lives in a cave. This girl is known to be a healer, and has shortly before succeeded her predecessor, but she is also some sort of magic woman – although her magic does not work. Béatrice gives her the amethyst ring of her father in order to curse him. However, when her father finds out, the girl in the cave ends up at the stake. In the same sequence when Béatrice sees her burn, we also see the children who ran away from the castle hang from the trees in white dresses which emphasise their innocence. Together with the burning of the witch these are strong symbols of the terror of the reign of François de Cortemare. The girl from *La Passion Béatrice* bears elements of the romantic as well as the rationalist tradition.

[67] In the novel he is more fiercely represented as he is also an Anti-Semitic: 'Also the Jews will be put to the fire, who crucified Christ and live by breeding money' (Unsworth, 1995: 124).

The construction of the witch in *Black Death* also bears elements from both the romantic as well as the rationalist tradition. First, the character of Langiva is clearly depicted as a wise woman of the woods, who had fled medieval Christian society after her husband and child were killed by the hands of a Christian. In the film she is depicted as having good knowledge of plants and medicine as she immediately takes care of Osmund's wound when he arrives in the village. With this knowledge of plants she also drugs the soldiers as she not only distrusts Christian soldiers, but had already killed the previous envoy of the bishop who entered the village. Also, the fact that the village has remained untouched by the plague, enforces the idea that Langiva truly takes care of her people. However, this construct of the witch bears strong rationalist elements as well. Langiva also uses her knowledge of plants to create the *illusion* that she is a necromancer, in order to get authority in her village. Historically, necromancy was one of the main concerns of the clergy from the twelfth century onwards and consisted technically of a 'divination performed by the summoning the spirits of the dead', which was not the same as being a witch (Bailey, 2002: 125, 2001: 970 & 989-990; see also Kieckhefer, 1990: 151-175). However, in the film she is considered to be a witch. Additionally, she prevents her villagers from being Christian, thereby resembling the idea of witchcraft as anti-Christian societies that had to be persecuted (Cohn, 1993: 147-148). However, as the Christians, in this film are portrayed to be at least equally worse, her actions can be interpreted as *saving* her villagers from the Christians. But in the end, she will also stand defenceless against the plague (see infra, 5.1.1b).

b) Jewish, Arab and pre-Christian medicine

> Que dire du Moyen Age scientifique? Il n'est que par ses ennemis, par les Arabes et les Juifs. Le reste est pis que le néant; c'est une honteuse reculade.
>
> J. Michelet, *L'Agonie du Moyen Age*, 1854 (1990), p. 34.

According to the thesis of Jules Michelet, because witches had fled the influence of the church they were able to look upon nature as it really was, freed from the suffocating grip of dogmatic thought. But the witch was not alone in her privileged position of being free from the influence of the church: other marginalised people, like shepherds or executioners, were able to look upon nature as it was or, as Michelet wrote, able to attend the 'université criminelle' (Michelet, 1966: 39). This holds true for other religions as well, by definition freed from the intellectual influence of the Church, that were also able to produce genuine physicians or (proto-)scientists during the Dark Ages. Especially pre-Christian or pagan religions as well Arab and Jewish culture are held in high esteem in these films. Remarkably, the role of Antiquity is not very

important here as it only seem to stand for abstract, theoretical rational thought, but this does not hold true for medicine. In case of medicine it are essentially the non-Christian traditions that are considered to be effective. Arguably, what these films are doing is not primarily praising other cultures, but rather criticising the assumed poor state of the official – Christian – medicine of the Dark Ages. As long as medicine is not derived from a dogmatic reading of the scriptures, it can be good. Therefore as a rule it could be stated that if it does not concern Christian medicine, it most likely is good medicine, regardless of the specific tradition.

In *The Advocate* there is an example where Arab medicine is considered to be more effective than Christian medicine. Just after Courtois discovered that it was the son of the lord, who was guilty of hunting Jewish boys , the father tells Courtois that his son has left the country. The Lord then tells the story of how they discovered he 'has the devil in him' and took him to an exorcist in Joinville, but not long after he again was found 'nailing dogs to trees. Three of them crucified, the middle one above the others naturally. They'd have burned him if they'd seen it'. However, he has sent his son to England because they have 'musselman surgeons there, and he may be helped', where the Christian exorcist failed. This is even reinforced by the contrast between Jewish and Christian medicine which will be discussed shortly. It is remarkable, however, that there are no Arab characters present in the film. Their medicine is sporadically known, but never by an Arab himself.

Contrary to the lack of Arab healers, there are quite some Jewish healers in films on the Dark Ages. Again in *The Advocate* the apothecary surgeon of the village is a Jew and when Courtois calls him to take a look at the body he is able to provide new and valuable information which proves to be crucial. Based upon how the flesh of the victim boy was cut he is able to deduce that it would be unlikely that the cuts were from an animal – as the official version goes – but were probably inflicted with a sharp object. In addition, as the blood was black when the surgeon first saw the body this meant that the boy was already dead for a long time and could, in fact, have been killed at an entirely different place than where the body was found. However, in line with the Anti-Semitism of the Dark Ages, as a Jew he cannot testify in a Christian court. Even when pigs and rats can testify, Jews cannot.[68]

In *The Pied Piper* there is the most peculiar combination of the concept of Jewish medicine and the romantic witch of Michelet. The rational protagonist of the film, Melius, is the Jewish scientist and apothecary of the town of Hamelin. In fact, it

[68] Also in *Ivanhoe*, for example, when Ivanhoe is hurt during the tournament it is Rowena, the daughter from the Jew Isaac of York, who can heal him. Not coincidentally and very reminiscent of Michelet, she has learned medicine of a woman, Miriam of Manassas, who was convicted and executed on charges of witchcraft. The trial against Rowena, who is at the end of the film also accused of witchcraft, is not accused of healing powers, but is the victim of a mock-trial aimed at hurting Ivanhoe and trying to suppress the rebellion against King John.

could be argued that Melius is the Jewish and male translation of Michelet's witch. As a Jew he is not bound by the dogma's of the Church, he is able to look upon nature as it really is, which leads him to consider the plague as a disease, and thus theoretically curable, and not as a punishment from God as the Church believes. Additionally, he is the town's apothecary who helps the people. Again, this is contrasted with the inability of the church to heal people as they only offer the sick words while letting them die. As Michelet wrote:

> Sauf le médecin arabe ou juif, chèrement payé par les rois, la médicine ne se faisait qu'à la porte des églises, au bénitier. Le dimanche, après l'office, il y avait force malades; ils demandaient des secours, et on leur donnait des mots: 'Vous avez péché, et Dieu vous afflige. Remerciez; c'est autant de moins sur les peines de l'autre vie. Résignez-vous, souffrez, mourez. L'Eglise a ses prières des morts'. Faibles, languissants, sans espoir, ni envie de vivre, ils suivaient très bien ce conseil et laissaient aller la vie'. (Michelet, 1966: 105-106)

This section is closely echoed in the film when the daughter of the burgomaster, just before her wedding, falls ill which puts the wedding at a risk. It appears that at first the burgomaster turned to the Bishop who is standing next to her bed offering her their prayers. However, he appears to be doing nothing as he has already administered the last sacrament. In despair, the Burgomaster then turns to Melius, the apothecary, who has to save his daughter with his herbs and medicine. When he sends someone to fetch Melius he asks him to 'hurry before they [the Bishop and his priests] carry us all to the grave'. When Melius arrives, he immediately diagnoses her with a common fever, not with plague as the church did, and prescribes rest, calm aided with some music (possibly a case of tarantism). Shortly after, they hear the music of the piper and summon him. When he arrives he succeeds in curing the girl with his music. In other words, whereas the Church that mocked Melius and called him a 'mere physician', he succeeds where they failed. In addition, when they find out he is a Jew, they show their real face and accuse Melius of blasphemy and sacrilege. Historically, Jews could not be tried for being a 'witch' (Cohn, 1993: 147), yet Melius ends up at the stake at the end of the film. At this point Demy even broadens the metaphor as he links the Anti-Semitism of the church with what happened during the Second War.

> The Black Death ended four years later, having killed an estimated 75.000.000 people. The religious persecution that followed was to remain without parallel until this century.

Shortly after the Second World War there was a tendency in historiography to look at the witch-crazes in a similar way to what happened to the Jews during the war. These crazes were seen as top-down state-organised persecutions that led to genocide (Gaskill, 2008: 1069; Toivo, 2007: 90-107).

In two instances films refer positively to knowledge that existed before the Christians. In *Le moine et la sorcière*, this is already implied as the film makes it a history of long durée, an institution that existed since the dawn of man. This means that the wise woman of the woods has knowledge from the time before it was forbidden to study nature. Once these women came in the woods, they received a new name. This is remarked by Etienne de Bourbon when he hears the name of Eldamere, which is not a Christian name. Her name, in fact, is derived from the elder tree to which she is connected in the film. Pamela Berger (1995: 94) used that name to give her a hint of pagan religion, ancient rites and tribes that possibly predated Christianity: 'It is possible that Guinefort, the dog saint, was, in part, a "holdover" from the ancient Celtic past, when certain saints were portrayed in a zooanthropomorphic form'.

The same can be seen in *Pope Joan* where the old woman knows more of herbs and medicine than the priest. The women know medicine and nature and pass their knowledge on (also to girls). The deterioration of the position of women with the coming of Christianity is something that is also made explicit in *Pope Joan*. During a storm her mother tells Johanna the myth of Wodan at the Well of Wisdom where he had to sacrifice one of his eyes in order to drink from the Well, after which, he passed his knowledge on, including to girls. Equally Aesculapius, the teacher and close adept of Antiquity, is in favour of teaching girls. But in the new situation where Christianity had imposed itself, *manu militari* according to the film, this came to an end. The village priest, Johanna's father, is an almost hyperbolic example of this. He forbids the midwife to use herbs to ease his wife's pain during birth giving, because according to the word of our Lord 'in sorrow shall thou bring forth children' (see supra, 4.1.1, p. 140).

4.2.3 Iconography of the Witch

Except Melius, who as a Jew had similar characteristics compared with the witch as a wise woman of the woods, all witches in films on the Dark Ages are women. The witch-trials have been called a 'Woman's Holocaust' as well as the witch was an icon of the second wave of the women's movement that started in the 1960's. She is the symbol of paternalist and conservative oppression (Shen, 2008: 20; De la Bretèque, 2004: 653; Mallan, 2000). Although historically it is estimated that twenty to twenty-five percent of the victims, as a direct result of the witch-trials, were men and even children could be accused of witchcraft, the majority of witches were mostly poor and older women (Opitz-Belakhal, 2009: 96; Hodgkin, 2007: 197-199; Waite, 2003: 7; Cohn, 1993: 144; Horsely, 1979: 689; Bovenschen et al., 1978). From a very early stage in history, as Bailey (2002: 120) argues based on Johannes Nider's (1330-1438)

Formicarius (1435-1437) and especially from the fifteenth century onwards witchcraft became more linked with women. The link between women and witchcraft became reinforced when from the fifteenth century onwards the witch for the first time became a character in the visual arts with Hans Baldung Grien (1484-1545) and Albrecht Dürer (1471-1528) to be the most important artists (Zika, 2007: 1 & 13; Sullivan, 2000). In the work of Dürer for the first time the two archetypical images of a witch appear such as the young and beautiful witch as in *Four Witches* (1497 as well as the ugly old witch in *Witch Riding Backwards on a Goat* (ca. 1500). These drawings, however, were not inspired by the witch-trials but were linked to humanism and the influence of classical texts on ancient witches (Zika, 2007: 7; Sullivan, 2000: 333-334 & 315-392). Ever since, popular culture has kept the gendered image of the witch. She has taken on many forms, such as for example the femme fatale, the old and ugly hag with a wart on her nose, the vampire or an evil stepmother (Shen, 2008: 20-21; Tuczay, 2007: 60-63).

The Seventh Seal

Le moine et la sorcière

As both the romantic and the rationalist tradition deny the reality of witchcraft, the witches are represented as 'normal' women. However, both traditions do place a different emphasis. In order to dramatically enhance the feeling of injustice and cruelty, a witch in the rationalist tradition is usually a young, beautiful girl in stark opposition with the cruel Inquisitor. This technique of making witches young and beautiful is a technique that was already used in contemporary demonologist treatises also to exploit the dramatic possibilities (Roper, 2006: 131). In the romantic tradition, where the women are wise women and have good knowledge of medicine, the witches are usually slightly older and often portrayed between the plants or in their workplace.

4.3 Conclusion

As Marty (2001: 160) wrote, the Middle Ages are not easily remembered for their scientific or cultural breakthroughs in the cinema. There are no films on Saint Dominic, Thomas Aquinas or Bernard of Clairvaux.[69] The Middle Ages are far more easily constructed as an intellectual dark age in which science or scientific progress was made impossible due to the suffocating grip of a dogmatic Church on society. Any innovation or alternative truth was considered to be invalid or even heretical as it denied the Truth of Christ's teachings as written in the Scriptures. The abovementioned films, however, all emphasise the fact that these (written) truths are not in line with reality. Writing is easily represented as something negative, but contrary to Bildhauer, who saw this as a general characteristic of medievalist films as a whole, we consider this to be the expression of dogmatism. The writings of Antiquity, for example, are considered to be positive. Arguably, it is not the inherent quality of these Classical works that is being praised, but they are mainly used to contrast with the darkness of medieval science. Although this is mostly correlated to the Church, it is not a synonym for the Church. William of Baskerville is despite being a member of the Church a critical and rational thinker. The village priest in *Le moine et la sorcière* is an 'old cheat' who defends his villagers and even Popes, such as Sergius II or Johanna, can be positively evaluated.

In *Le moine et la sorcière*, the elitist, written and clerical culture of the inquisitor is completely out of touch with the natural and harmonious world of the peasants. The common people have no need or use for concepts as 'heresy', 'superstition' or 'witchcraft'. This clash between elite and peasant culture is the intellectual counterpart for the feudal divide discussed in the former chapter. Where the people are physically oppressed by the count de Villars, they are being intellectually oppressed by Etienne de Bourbon. However, just as the people were relatively able to resist the usurping power of their count, in the end the inquisitor will not be successful as well. Although he will change the cult of the greyhound into the cult of a human saint accompanied by a dog, he will not have changed the village. The film suggests that this harmonious peasant society was able to keep their ways until the last woman of the woods, Fanchette, died in the twentieth century. The film advocates tolerance, or letting the people be who they are. As the village priest says, you can't change the ways of the people, and their different ways should be respected

[69] Only Joan of Arc, Francis of Assisi and recently Hildegard of Bingen have found their way into the cinema, but it could be argued that this is not for what they stood for during the Middle Ages. For example, Joan of Arc is arguably best remembered as the saviour of France, Francis of Assisi for his love for the people contrasted with the church as an institute, and *Vision – Aus dem Leben der Hildegard von Bingen* (Von Trotta 2009) is closely related to feminism.

by others. The best example of this is Elda who, although she does not believe in the ritual in the Sacred Woods, still performs it because it is the best possible solution for the people. Her position may seem to be ambivalent, but she is a clear example of tolerance, contrasted with the dogmatic inquisitor who will use violence to impose his artificial and useless mindset on the people.

There are two sides to this dogmatic thinking. First, as a result of the anti-intellectual position of the Church, this leads to a general state of superstition and ignorance. From the moment that the monks in *The Name of the Rose* are faced with the death of a monk that they cannot explain, they immediately fear the presence of the evil one in the abbey. However, when looked at with an open mind, and with the sharp observational skills of William of Baskerville, a more logical solution is easily found. When shortly thereafter other monks die, again a deductive reasoning is followed, symbolised in Ubertino De Casale's reciting of the Apocalypse. However, and this opens the door to obscurantism, if a monk knows that the next trumpet will prophesise blood, he can hide the body in a pot of pigs blood to avert attention.

In other words, ignorance and superstition can be exploited. This can range from selling relics as merchandise to credulous people, to an elite who is deliberately trying to hide information from the people. In *The Name of the Rose*, all divergent knowledge is literally barred away, and defended by the abbot, the librarian and Jorge of Burgos. As laughter kills fear, and without fear there is no need of God, the second book of the *Poetics* by Aristotle that was completely devoted to laughter, is literally a threat to the power and authority of the Church. However, the sharp and critical mind of William of Baskerville sees through all this obscurantism and finds the book of Aristotle. This leads to the death of Jorge of Burgos, and in fact the downfall of the obscurantist abbey. It could be presumed that this is an echo of Protestant propaganda that for centuries denounced the Church as a corrupt power-institute. Faith as such is not seen as something negative, but the idea of self-interested power is.

Also in *The Reckoning*, only with the sharp detective and observational qualities of Martin and Nicholas, the truth can be revealed. As long as the people were not aware of this, the power of lord De Guise remained intact. But when the artists turn these events into a play, thereby inventing modern avant-garde theatre that opens the eyes of the audience, the power of the lord is broken. In fact, also seigneur Jehan D'aufferre's power thrives on the ignorance of his people. As they believe that animals can be guilty of killing children, the seigneur can easily shift the blame to an animal and protect his son. The answer given to both superstition and obscurantism is education. Significantly, most protagonists in films on the Dark Ages are artists, creative thinkers, lawyers or doctors. They excel in sharp-witted critical thinking through which they understand the situation way before their medieval companions do. This also opens the door to more gender-equality as the medieval hero is not the

typical hard-bodied masculine knight fighting for King and Glory. However, it is this different mindset that makes them ill suited in a Dark Ages society. It are their actions, as they see through the obscurantism in society, that often leads to the downfall of feudalism or dogmatism. This may result in Revolution (*The Reckoning* and *The Name of the Rose*) or they form an undercurrent of resilience against the medieval darkness (*Pope Joan* and *Le moine et la sorcière*). Arguably, where the Renaissance is the symbol for the origin of critical and free thinking, the French Revolution can still be seen as the moment from which the people were free to think what they wanted. Essentially (and theoretically), where dogmatism ends from the Renaissance onwards, obscurantism ends from the (French) Revolution onwards.[70]

On a meta-level, these films are also educating, or at least offering an exemplum, to its modern audience. *Le moine et la sorcière*, based upon an exemplum, is an exemplum on its own showing how fanaticism can blind men from seeing reality and how this leads to intolerance. *The Reckoning* not only focuses on a morality play, but is a morality play itself. *Pope Joan* can be seen as a *vita*, or as the life of a Saint, showing how brave and courageous Joan was, and how we should take an example of her. *Häxan* was a lecture on superstition and fanaticism. And finally, *The Pied Piper* (a children's story) and *The Advocate* (Fabliaux) are based upon genres with a clear moral, which we will discuss in the next chapter.

The main victims of this dogmatic reading of the Scriptures are the Jews and women. Based upon a literal reading of *Genesis* 3 (*Pope Joan*, *The Reckoning* and *The Pied Piper*), the first letter of Saint Paul to Timothy (*Pope Joan*), the council of Macon (*The Advocate* and *La Passion Béatrice*) or the church fathers (*The Name of the Rose*), women are excluded from medieval society. However, as an implicit refutation of this dogmatic misogyny, women play important roles in films on the Dark Ages (e.g. Béatrice in *La Passion Béatrice*, Johanna in *Pope Joan*, Langiva in *Black Death*, Elda in *Le moine et la sorcière* or the mute women in *The Reckoning*).

This victimisation of women is most obvious in the representation of medieval witchcraft. Similar to the representation of animal trials in *The Advocate*, the witch was historically a very complex early-modern phenomenon that has been lifted out of history to become a symbol or a metaphor for the ignorance, intolerance and fanaticism of the Middle Ages as the Dark Ages (Sharpe, 2011: 84). Contrary to the historical tradition on witches and their Sabbaths, in films on the Dark Ages they are

[70] As a related example, see Verhofdstadts remarks against Bart de Wever: 'We zitten in een situatie waarin meneer De Wever God de Vader en de profeet Mohammed in persoon is. En tegen God mag niemand iets zeggen. Hij is het orakel en wij moeten zwijgen. Is wat hij zegt de Bijbel misschien? Sorry, maar we hebben ondertussen de Franse Revolutie achter de rug' (Guy Verhofstad, in De Morgen, september 2012'. In BDC (2014). 'Wat Guy Verhofdstadt en Bart de Wever vroeger over elkaar dachten'. *De Morgen*, June 15th 2014.

represented as individuals without accomplices. There are two different traditions on representing medieval witches in films on the Dark Ages.

The most dominant tradition of representing witchcraft is the rationalist tradition. This tradition essentially denies the reality of witchcraft and turns the witch into an innocent victim of a fanatical and persecuting Church. This tradition is very present in Scandinavian cinema. In *Häxan*, Christensen's idiosyncratic lecture on the history of witchcraft, considers witch-hunting to be the symbol of a dogmatic and misogynist Church, mostly symbolised in the notorious *Malleus Maleficarum* (1486). Although this book was mostly ignored in the fifteenth century, it has become the symbol of a misogynist and persecuting Church. However, as clerical writing was out of touch with reality, none of the women accused of witchcraft were actually guilty. Similar to Evans and the animal trials, Christensen contrasts the medieval witch-trials in direct juxtaposition with contemporary science and rational society. But, although being implicitly glorifying the present, the film also warned against contemporary superstition. Similar examples of this kind of witch can be found in *The Seventh Seal*, *The Name of the Rose*, *The Advocate*, *La Passion Béatrice* and *Black Death*. All persecutions in films on the Dark Ages are top-down persecutions instigated by the Church, except one scene in *Black Death* where a young woman is accused of bringing the plague to the village. However, what all these women have in common is that they are either hysterical, delirious or just women who happen to be at the wrong place in the wrong time. As they are essentially innocent victims, they are represented as young and beautiful women, which dramatically enhances the contrast with the fanaticism and violence of the Inquisitor and the Church.

The second construct of the medieval witch, which is more overlooked in the literature on medievalist films, is the romantic tradition of Jules Michelet in his *La Sorcière* (1862). Similar to the rationalist tradition, the witch is an equally innocent woman, but this tradition also focuses on the dogmatic and artificial worldviews of the Church. As a victim of the misogynist and violent Church, women had to flee society and lived in the woods. There, however, freed from all Christian dogma, they were free to look at nature as it really was and became history's first scientist. These women became especially proficient in medical sciences. In line with Michelet's ideas on the people, these women placed their knowledge in function of the people and became a general physician. Where the Church could only offer words, and help people die, these witches could heal and offer life and hope. This is mostly visible in *Le moine et la sorcière*, where Elda offers hope and relief to the people, where the village priest and Etienne de Bourbon stand helpless. Because Elda learns from nature, which is according to dogmatic Christianity an 'imperfect mirror', she is accused of witchcraft. The influence of this construct by Michelet is visible in the reviews on *The Reckoning*. Although she is never called a 'witch' in the film, and she is

only falsely accused of the murder on Thomas Wells, because she is a healer held in great esteem by the villagers, she is recognised as a witch.

Similar to Michelet's construct of the witch, all kinds of medical knowledge that is no Christian knowledge, especially Jewish, Arabic and pre-Christian pagan medicine, is held in high esteem. Melius, in *The Pied Piper*, for example, can study nature for what it is as he is a Jew, but this results in him being accused of heresy and is burned at the stake. The son of the seigneur in *The Advocate* is sent off at the end of the film to England to see Arab doctors, as previous exorcist attempts have failed. Earlier in that film it was a Jewish apothecary surgeon who was able to deduct based on the markings on the dead boy's body that he was not the victim of an animal as claimed by the court. As a Jew, however, he did not have the same rights as the rats, and was not allowed to testify. And Johanna's medical knowledge, on which she builds her career, comes directly from the pre-Christian knowledge of what she is taught by her mother. As these witches are wise women, and doctors for the people, these women are usually presented as slightly older.

V The *Extreme* and Primitive Dark Ages

> Let us go back for a moment to the 14th century. The people were yet but little civilized. The church had indeed subdued them; but they all suffered from the ill consequences of their original rudeness. The dominion of the law was not yet confirmed. Sovereigns had everywhere to combat powerful enemies to internal tranquillity and security. The cities were fortresses for their own defence. Marauders encamped on the roads. – The husbandman was a feudal slave, without possessions of his own. – Rudeness was general. – Humanity, as yet unknown to the people. – Witches and heretics were burned alive. – Gentle rulers were condemned as weak; - wild passions, severity, and cruelty, everywhere predominated. – Human life was little regarded. – Governments concerned not themselves about the numbers of their subjects, for whose welfare it was incumbent on them to provide.
>
> J. Hecker, *The Epidemics of the Middle Ages,* 1859, pp. 20-21.

In his introduction to *The Epidemics of the Middle Ages* (1859), Justin Hecker thought it necessary to provide some contextual historical information on the fourteenth century before taking on the subject of the Black Death. The way he approached his topic revealed much of the time in which this research took place. First, as Germany had suffered greatly from the cholera epidemics in the 1830s, Hecker thought that by studying the great historical epidemics valuable insights could be generated for understanding contemporary diseases (Getz, 1991: 274-283). Second, and similar to the history of witchcraft, medical history is easily inclined to tell a progressivist narrative that emphasises the evolution from primitive and superstitious practices to modern scientific, humane – and effective – medicine (Micale, 1985: 703).[71] This was not different in the work of Hecker (1859: xi), who praised the 'science of medicine, which, in this age of mature judgement and multifarious learning' could for the first time truly understand what happened in the fourteenth century. However, as the short quote above indicates, this aspect of progress was not the only premise in Hecker's ideas on the fourteenth century as he considered medieval society as a whole to be inferior compared to his age (see Little and Rosenwein, 1998a: 2-3). Ever since the idea of progress found its way into society, beginning with Turgot and Condorcet, and later linked to the ideas of Charles Darwin, Herbert Spencer or Auguste Comte, contemporary society was considered to be at the highest point on the evolutionary scale, which meant that everything before that point was a gradual step down on that ladder. Egon Friedell (1965: 85), another author who had

[71] E.g. a tweet on Saturday 15 March 2014 by Koen Fillet to plug his show *InterneKeuken* on Radio 1: 'The Middle Ages ended on Friday 16 October 1846', referring to the moment in history when for the first time surgery was performed under narcosis.

influential opinions on the Black Death to which we will return in this chapter, for example compared the Middle Ages to 'die Pubertätszeit der Mitteleuropäischen Menschheit'.

This chapter focuses on the Middle Ages as an age of general extremity and primitiveness. As the narrative goes, ever since the fall of the Western Roman Empire, Europe had relapsed into a state of cultural and societal barbarity that would only be overcome from the Renaissance onwards. As the narrator tells at the beginning of *The Dark Ages*, a documentary made by the History Channel (2006): 'When the Roman Empire crumbled Europe was besieged by famine, plague, persecutions, and a state of war so persistent it was only rarely interrupted by peace'. As the institutions and political fabric of classical society were torn down, the medieval had become a childlike, primitive and cruel society, ruled by the laws of the jungle. Wars, for example, were not only persistent, but they were also fought by primitive brutes with blunt weapons bashing and hacking into each other (see McGlynn, 1993: 28; Kirkland, 1924: 139). A notorious example of medieval war mentality is when the French cathar city of Béziers fell into the hands of its catholic besiegers during the Albigensian Crusade in 1209. Arnauld Amaury, the catholic commander, feared that many heretics in the city of Béziers would pretend to be catholic in order to save their own lives. So he solved this issue by ordering: 'Tuez-les tous, Dieu reconnaîtra les siens'. Saving the lives of the Catholics in the city was held in lower esteem than killing heretics, even if this meant massacring an entire city, women and children included. However, as is often the case with strong stories set in the Middle Ages, the truthfulness of this story is highly debatable (see Graham-Leigh, 2001: 283 & 301-303; Pernoud, 1977: 14). When the adjective 'medieval' is added, it usually takes violence, cruelty or ignorance to the next level.

Even in contemporary historical research, the persistent 'grand narrative of progress' or the 'ghost of Norbert Elias' is still visible where accounts of medieval violence are often presented in more violent terms than the actual sources attest for (see e.g. Falk, 2014), or where great medieval doctors are automatically seen as an exception to the rule as for example Guy de Chauliac (1300-1368), a famous pest doctor, was considered to be '*for his time* a very sophisticated and sensitive man' (Murdoch, 1984: 10, italics mine; see also Grigsby, 2008: 142-150; Van Arsdall, 2008: 135-141). In popular culture the medieval usually is a ready-made signifier for extremity. Famous is the example in *Pulp Fiction* (Tarantino 1994) when, after Butch freed Marcellus Wallace from a sodomising party, Marcellus pledges his revenge: 'You hear me talking hillbilly-boy, I aint through with you by a damn sight, I'm gonna get *medieval* on your ass' (italics mine, see also Bull, 2005: 11-12). Where violence is of all ages, medieval violence is the *nec plus ultra* of barbarity.

As the political and the intellectual side of a Dark Ages society have been discussed, here we will focus on the general characterisation of a medieval society.

First, we will focus on one of the most emblematic events of the medieval as the age of disease: the Black Death. Second, we will give a general view on the Dark Ages world, from warfare to daily life and discuss this construct and its relation to the concept of 'realism'. This will also be linked to some general thoughts on the Dark Ages imaginary.

5.1 The Black Death

Arguably, of all the diseases or the great epidemics in human history, there is none with the same level of 'superstardom' as the Black Death (Getz, 1991: 265-266; Steel, 1981: 88-89). In only six years, between 1347 and 1353, about twenty million people in Europe alone died as a result of the plague, then approximately thirty percent of the population.[72] The outbreak was part of a worldwide epidemic that came from the East and is believed to have been a massive outburst of the plague bacteria *Yersinia Pestis*, a disease transmitted from the black rat to humans with fleas as vectors, although discussion remains on the nature and spreading of the disease.[73] The aim of this section is to analyse which aspects of the Black Death are still considered to be relevant for a modern audience and how meaning is attributed to this dark episode in Western-European history. According to De la Bretèque (2004: 699-700), the Black Death is one of the elements that truly defines the Middle Ages as a Dark Age as it fits naturally with the idea of the Middle Ages as a period of filth, disease, deformity and death.

[72] It was not the first time that a pestilence ravaged Europe, like for example in the third century Roman empire and in the sixth century Byzantine empire. Returning great outbreaks occurred in London in 1665 and Marseille in 1721. Only relatively recently, in 1894, a pestilence struck large parts of China and India (Ziegler, 1969: 25-26; Biraben and Le Goff, 1969: 1491-1508).

[73] Critics argue that fleas and rats alone cannot account for the rapid spreading of the disease as it ravaged cities as fast as the countryside where there would be less rats. Additionally, the evidence suggesting that the plague ravaged as hard during the summer or winter, or that the mortality of the disease was significantly higher than after the outburst of *Yersinia Pestis* in India and China in 1894, which only had a mortality rate of ten percent compared with the assumed thirty between 1347 and 1353, raises questions amongst critics. The most dominant alternative explanation is the theory of Graham Twigg who argues that parallel with bubonic plague there was a huge outburst of anthrax. This would explain the high mortality on the countryside as this disease is spread from cattle. However, despite the often vague writings of contemporary observers, who had no medical training and whose descriptions of the disease could fit multiple diseases with comparable symptoms, and despite the often liberal use of the term 'pest' which could signify multiple diseases, the fragmentary and often conflicting demographic evidence, the rare archaeological evidence and recently the DNA-research, it is still largely assumed that the plague bacteria *Yersinia Pestis* was the 'main disease' that struck Europe between 1347 and 1353 (see for example Hufthammer and Walløe, 2013: 1758; Kacki et al., 2011; Bos et al., 2011; Theilmann and Cate, 2007: 376 & 392; Benedictow, 2004: 8-34; Cantor, 2003: 21-37 & 82; Aberth, 2003: 207-209; Cohn, 2002: 735-737; Raoult and Drancourt, 2002; Roussos, 2002: 125-126; Jones, 1996: 100; Slack, 1989: 461-462; Davis, 1986: 470; Twigg, 1984, 2003: 11; Gottfried, 1983: xiii; Ziegler, 1969: 24-29).

Additionally there is discussion on the number of casualties or the percentage of the European population that died as a direct consequence of the plague. According to Norman Cantor (2003: 15) only twenty percent of the European population died where Benedictow (2004: 383) even suggests a mortality rate of sixty percent (see also Noymer, 2007: 624). Evidently, the numbers will vary geographically as the plague for example ravaged Tuscany but relatively spared Bohemia. In case of England, where the occurrence of the plague is relatively well documented, the estimates indicate that approximately one third of the population died, which equals about 1.4 million deaths. Although it is impossible to extrapolate this number to the rest of Europe, there is a broad consensus that a general death rate of one in three is a plausible approximation (Slack, 1989: 461; Ziegler, 1969: 232-239).

Where the iconography and meaning of the Black Death has been the subject of studies in art and literature, as for example Raymond Crawfurd's *Plague and Pestilence in Literature and Art* (1914) and more recently Christine Boeckl's *Images of Plague and Pestilence. Iconography and Iconology* (2003), this is not the case for film (see e.g. Boeckl, 2003: 3). Only John Aberth (2003) devoted a chapter to this topic (V: 'Welcome to the Apocalypse. Black Death Films') in which he discussed *The Seventh Seal*, *The Navigator: A Medieval Odyssey* and *Book of Days*; and De la Bretèque (2004) (XXIII: 'La peste noire. Les grandes peurs moyenâgeuses') mainly discussed *The Seventh Seal* and *The Pied Piper*.

In this section we will analyse how films on the Dark Ages represent the Black Death and how meaning is attributed to this calamitous event in European history. We argue that rather than dealing with the historical debates, films on the Dark Ages attribute meaning to the Black Death according to two different cultural traditions. First we will discuss the dominant Greek and Hebrew tradition that got its definite form in the eighteenth century in which the plague is a metaphor for a social plague (*The Seventh Seal* and *Black Death*). Second, we will focus on a divergent tradition that originated in the 'Gothic Epidemiology', which considered the Black Death as the necessary evil to free European society from the Middle Ages. We argue that this tradition has been adapted in the cinema according to a secularised version of the Great Flood Myth (*The Pied Piper*, *The Advocate* and *Anazapta*).

5.1.1 The Social Plague or a Sinful Society

As the plague bacteria was only discovered at the turn of the twentieth century, medieval medicine stood defenceless, which allowed many different theories to circulate at the time. For a long time it was believed that the disease was carried by 'miasma' or a corrupted or rotten air which implied that the disease could be carried and spread by wind. An astrological answer was given to King Philip VI by the Medical Faculty of the University of Paris claiming that a conjunction of Saturn, Jupiter and Mars in the House of Aquarius had something to do with the plague. Amongst the general population, however, the most widespread opinion was that they were being punished by God for their sinful behaviour. A notorious consequence of this were the often virulent outbursts of anti-Semitic violence, as a punishment of letting the 'enemy' live within their society, which led to accusing the Jews of poisoning the wells to pogroms, especially in Germany (Cohn Jr., 2007; Benedictow, 2004: 3-4 & 387-394; Cantor, 2003: 32, 141 & 173-195; Tuchman, 1978: 101-116; Carpentier, 1962: 1068).

The pestilence as a form of collective and divine punishment for human transgressions is an idea that can already be found in Greek and Hebrew (biblical)

writings. Where leprosy is considered to be a punishment for individual sins, as a 'disease of the soul' (Covey, 2001: 316; Brody, 1974: 59) or as 'the somatisation *within individuals* of God's punishment' (italics mine, Nirenberg, 2008: 157; Zimmerman, 2008: 563) the plague always has a collective or societal dimension. When King David for example had sinned against God, it was not only him but the Israelites as a population who were punished with plague to which David even replied to God: 'Surely I have sinned, and I have done wickedly; but these sheep, what have they done? Let Your hand, I pray, be against me and against my father's house' (2 Samuel 24, 14-17 (NKJV); see also 1 *Chronicles* 21-28; Boeckl, 2000: 14 & 154; Crawfurd, 1914: 5 & 19). Similarly, when the Philistines captured the Ark of the Covenant and took it into their city of Ashdod, they were collectively punished by God who sent them the plague (1 *Samuel* 5: 1-12). In Greek literature the idea of the plague as a form of divine punishment for human transitions can be found in Homer's *Iliad* where the plague was sent by Apollo to the Greeks after the rape of Chryseis by Agamemnon, or in Sophocles' *Oedipus Rex* when Oedipus had disregarded the divine oracles, which angered Apollo (Boeckl, 2000: 35; Crawfurd, 1914: 4-6). However, the way Thucydides described the plague that struck Athens during the Peloponnesian war (430 BC) created a topos that many later authors followed when describing the plague. In his description Thucydides did not focus on where the plague came from or what the medical implications were, but he focused essentially on the psychological effects of the plague and more specifically on the disintegration of society characterised by parents abandoning their children, the demoralisation, the dead remaining unburied, the religious fanaticism as well as amorality amongst the living and the powerlessness of the physicians and the relentless progress of the disease (Aberth, 2003: 207-208; Boeckl, 2000: 27; Girard, 1974: 835; Crawfurd, 1914: 39). When later authors, as for example Boccaccio in his *Decamerone*, were describing the plague, they often more relied on Thucydides than actually giving an eyewitness account of what happened (Wray, 2012; Zink and Lydon, 1991: 278). Also in the visual arts, as for example in Nicholas Poussin's famous painting *The Plague of Ashdod* (1631), the focus does not lie on the destruction of the temple of Dagon in which the Ark was stored, but mainly on the psychological effects and the terror that the plague caused in society.

According to Gordon the literary genre of plague narratives reached its form as it still exists today, of which Albert Camus' *La Peste* (1947) is a well known recent example, in the eighteenth century. Where the Greek and Hebrew tradition contained the idea of a sinful society they never used it as the 'framework for a story about the community', and even Thucydides focussed more on politics than on the plague itself thereby making his version essentially a story of what happens when a city collapses 'through its unwise political choices' (Gordon, 1996: 68). Where there are remarkably few literary sources on the Black Death dating from the fourteenth century (Zink and

Lydon, 1991: 269 & 271), plague writings boomed especially after the plague epidemic in Marseille in 1721, which Gordon (1997: 77) calls the beginning of the modern literary tradition on the plague (see also Jones, 1991: 102-103). He places this in the context of the French eighteenth-century Enlightenment where the *philosophes* where praising the *société* or modern civil society. As a consequence of their ideals about the modern rational city, only then could the plague truly become the antithesis of society:

> But precisely because anything threatening the concourse of the city was so repugnant, the plague could now be exploited as a paradigm of evil. It was only when the causal understanding of civilization (exchange) and the causal understanding of disease (contagion) became mirror images of each other, only when commerce – in the broad eighteenth-century sense of urban interaction – became the perceived motor of both sociability and calamity, of both progress and death, that the plague became describable as a disaster of the highest magnitude. Only then could the plague symbolize the other side of the coin of rationality, the uncontrollable force not outside human association but internal to it. And only then did it become one of the favourite images of those who were anxious about the paradoxes and limits of the modern city. (Gordon, 1997: 70)

The plague reflected the limits of civil society or even modernity as a whole. Despite all rationality, technology and modernity, this disease was still able to tear society down. For example, where the much praised (sea)trade brought Marseilles its riches, it was the port that introduced the plague to the city. It is in fact a secular translation of a divine punishment as 'urban economic greatness can backfire' (Gordon, 1997: 81-82).

The epidemic in Marseille of 1721 proved to be the last outburst of plague in Europe. From then on, the meaning of the plague became more and more secularised, which opened the door to a more relevant and contemporary allegorical use of the plague. Additionally, at the end of the nineteenth century, when the bacteria causing the plague (the *yersinia pestis*) was discovered, the disease lost much of its former notoriety.[74] In the nineteenth century plague paintings were being made referring to the new threats such as cholera or yellow fever or in the twentieth and twenty-first century applied to AIDS, SARS or even bird-flue. The meaning of the plague had now

[74] In *Flesh+Blood* (Verhoeven 1985), for example, the plague has lost all allegorical meaning and has become a disease like any other. In fact, the use of the plague here fits in the discussion of the former chapter on Christian versus Arab medicine. Where father George stands powerless against the plague, and performs bloodlettings of which we now know to be mostly counterproductive, Arab medicine is shown in the film to be able to cure the plague. Steven, a character directly linked to the Renaissance in the film, mocks father George by telling him that 'the graveyards are full of your tried and tested remedies' and adds: 'Why don't you try something new? According to a recent Arab text, you have to lance the swellings'. The priest, of course, does not want to try something new ('Heathens have nothing they can teach me. Lancing the swellings is unchristian'). However, later in the film it is shown that the Arab technique is effective, where Christian medicine is not. In other words, Verhoeven uses the plague as a more neutral signifier for medical progress, as new science entered fourteenth century Europe. This new science is in the film able to cure the plague, which in the long run might free the population from the dogmatic and counterproductive Christian medicine. This film has not been selected in the corpus as the film is set in the sixteenth century (see supra, 2.2.2, p. 63).

become a signifier for all kinds of new possibly devastating, rapidly spreading – contemporary – diseases that proved to be an unstoppable 'force beyond human control' and was again amongst us (Aberth, 2003: 210 & 248; Carpentier, 2001: 115; Boeckl, 2000: 2, 5 & 150-153; Dumas, 1992: 1; Getz, 1991: 281).[75]

In conclusion, as Crawfurd (1914: 1) wrote, the plague is essentially not an 'affair of the body', but an 'affair of the mind'. What is emphasised in this tradition is not as much the medical side of the story or even the economical consequences, but the psychological effects or more specifically the terror it can spread in society. A plague-stricken society is characterised by rapidly spreading violence, the collapse of political and religious authorities and the destruction of the social fabric (Harris, 2006: 244; Girard, 1974: 833-835 & 843). In this section we will analyse two films related to this tradition. First, we will discuss *The Seventh Seal*, where the plague is a signifier for a meaningless world ruled by fear and terror as an allegorical setting for Bergman's existentialist doubts. Second, we will focus on *Black Death* as a contemporary allegory where the plague stands for contemporary fear of the spreading of religious fanatical violence and the use of biological warfare.[76]

a) 'The Terror of Emptiness in life' in The Seventh Seal

Arguably the most famous film related to the Black Death is Ingmar Bergman's landmark film *The Seventh Seal* (1957). In the acclaimed opening of the film a fourteenth century knight, Antonius Block, and his squire, Jöns, have returned from the Crusades and arrive in their homeland which is stricken with plague. When Block at the beginning of the film is unable to pray, it is first indicated that he has lost his faith during the crusades. Not much later Death comes to take him away, but similar

[75] In films, only AIDS has symbolically been represented as the plague. In *The Navigator: A Medieval Odyssey* (Ward 1988) the link between the contemporary and the medieval world is made directly by juxtaposing them by means of a time-travelling plot. It creates an image of upcoming doom. As the opening credit of the film tells us: 'In the mid-14th century one third of Europe's population succumbed to a new disease. The shadow which advanced across Europe into England was known as The Black Death'. According to Cantor (2003: 263), this film was a good reflection of the fear for the upcoming doom of the plague in medieval society. Although the reading of a 'doomsday threat of nuclear annihilation' is still possible, the fact that the a hooded skull is flashed on the TV-screens in the film is a direct reference to a commercial by Australia's National Advisory Committee on AIDS, thereby making the link to AIDS explicit (Aberth, 2003: 248; see also Finke and Shichtman, 2010: 321-334; Gomel, 2000: 418). Because this film is a time-travelling film, we have not included this film in the corpus.

[76] However, the construction of the plague as a signifier for a disintegrating society is not an exclusive feature of films on the Dark Ages. In *Excalibur*, for example, the plague strikes society during the time when Arthur is sick. Although the plague shows the same characteristics, such as striking collectively and indiscriminatingly and is a clear signifier for the disintegration of society, the plague is first and foremost a symptom for what happens with society when the king is sick.

to the fifteenth century morality play *Elckerlyck* ('Lieve Doot, verdraghet mi tot morghen, Dat ic mi bespreken mach van desen'), Block asks and gets reprieve from Death so he can perform one last meaningful act in life. This reprieve lasts as long as Antonius Block can hold out against Death in a game of chess, an image Bergman got from a painting on the wall in a small church in Täby in Sweden where he used to go as a child (Woods, 2014: 80-81; Marty, 2001: 151-152; Mambrino, 1975: 52; Bergman, 1975: 70-71; Schein, 1975: 121).

How can the plague in this film be interpreted? A first possible solution lies in reading the film from a historical perspective, as for example Aberth (2003: 216-243) did. According to him the plot of the film was most probably set in 1350, when a circular letter of Magnus Ericsson in the spring of that year warned Sweden against the coming of the plague. In this context Aberth interpreted the crusades in the film as the campaigns of Sweden against the Russian Republic of Novgorod (although Jöns clearly speaks of ten years in the Holy Land in his conversation with Albertus Pictor as well as during his fight with Raval). However, as is usually the case when analysing medieval films according to the Fidelity Model, the film disappointed Aberth. In his opinion, the film only 'partially succeeded in conveying the period atmosphere and thought of the fourteenth century' and he considered the projection of some of Bergman's personal opinions onto the medieval characters to be 'completely out of place in the Middle Ages' and called it an 'anachronism' (Aberth, 2003: 217, 227 & 239). Also Paden (1998: 300), based upon a historical reading of the film, argued that the film spoke 'an idiom that could not have been imagined in the Middle Ages'.

This brought Arthur Lindley (1998) to completely discard the historical layer of the film: 'Are we in the Middle Ages? Officially, the date is 1349. Actually, of course, we are in Beckett-time (that is, Any- or No-time), the major difference being that this time Godot comes, and turns out to be just who we thought he would be, albeit disguised as Mephistopheles. […] We are looking, in short at the almost painfully familiar Nevernever-but-always-land of twentieth-century European high modernism. If we are in any historical period, it is less the 1340s of the plot premise than the sub-atomic early 1950s, with universal death looming out of the northern sky'. Or as Crowther (1975: 78) summarised: 'the plague […] plainly symbolizes the nuclear bomb' (see also Powell, 1975: 55). This argumentation is mostly based upon what Bergman wrote in his program note to *The Seventh Seal*:

> In my film the crusader returns from the Crusades as the soldier returns from the war today. In the Middle Ages, men lived in terror of the plague. Today they live in fear of the

> atomic bomb. *The Seventh Seal* is an allegory with a theme that is quite simple: man, his eternal search for God, with death as his only certainty.[77]

However, as the respected plague historian Elisabeth Carpentier (2000: 111-114) wrote on *The Seventh Seal,* the film is not a 'film historique', but 'une oeuvre d'art' that is not looking to describe a particular plague epidemic, but only tries to create 'un monde de peste'. Additionally, as Cantor (2003: 15) pointed out, the metaphor of the plague is generally not used for an *external* threat to society as the plague metaphor stresses the *internal* disintegration and fear and terror that lives *within* a plague-stricken society. The meaning of the plague in *The Seventh Seal* is therefore more than only the expression of a fear of the Bomb in the context of the fifties (see also Cowie, 1975: 101).

The Seventh Seal is traditionally seen as the expression of the personal struggle of Bergman with his faith or more specifically the existentialist doubt and difficulty of finding meaning in life. Being the son of a Lutheran pastor, very early on in his life, Bergman became acquainted with all the great questions and moments in life. As Bergman (in Stubbs, 1975: 64) once remarked: 'When one is born and raised in the home of a minister, one has a chance at an early age to catch a glimpse behind the scenes of life and death. Father conducts a funeral, father officiates at a wedding, father performs a baptism, acts as a mediator, writes a sermon. The devil became an early acquaintance'. However, when Bergman was nineteen years old he lost his faith, which would lead to quite a struggle visible in his oeuvre.[78] The religious and intellectual struggle of the character of Antonius Block in *The Seventh Seal* has mostly been interpreted as the personification of Bergman's personal struggle of finding meaning in life, but also more broadly as the struggle of modern Western man in general (Woods, 2014: 81; Pua, 2012; Steene, 1975a: 4, 1975b: 93; Sarris, 1975: 81; Donner, 1975: 149-150; Scott, 1975: 25-41).[79] In this context, the traditional meaning of the plague as a signifier for a disintegrating society or the antithesis of society serves as a perfect setting.

From the moment Antonius Block got reprieve from Death, which enables him to perform one last meaningful act in life, the film is structured as a journey 'as the protagonists advance spatially, [and] the adventures and visions they encounter either help them toward self-understanding or help us to a greater understanding of their natures' (Stubbs, 1975: 66). The opening scene by the sea has been interpreted

[77] Strangely enough, this text is not to be found in the reproduction of Bergman's program note as reproduced in *Ingmar Bergman. Essays in Criticism*, eds. S.M. Kaminsky and J.F. Hill (see Bergman, 1975, see also Bergman, 1968).

[78] As well as father figures in his films which are incapable of love (Stubbs, 1975: 63).

[79] Complementary, the role of Jöns has been equalled to a 'modern agnostic'. As Donner (1975: 150 & 154) remarked, the main focus in analysing *The Seventh Seal* has always been the Knight, while Jöns has to be seen as the compliment of Antonius Block, as 'parts of the same spectrum'.

as the 'rebirth' of the knight, a moment of transition similar to the one Nicholas experiences in *The Reckoning*, after which the knight goes searching for new meaning in life (Haydock, 2008: 41; Marty, 2001: 152). At first, it is indeed difficult for Block to find meaning in the plague stricken world of *The Seventh Seal*:

> All about is desolation, suffering, rotting corpses, physical manifestations of an imminent evil, a foreshadowing of doom – and people driven to desperation, most of them acting blindly, senselessly, following grossly supposititious rituals, official religion itself having become part of the corruption. (Gervais, 2001: 50)

Especially the Church, with which Bergman personally struggled the most, is portrayed in a negative light. As Antonius Block confesses to Mia, the wife of the travelling artists in the film, 'faith is a torment, did you know that? It is like loving someone who is out there in the darkness but never appears, no matter how loudly you call' (Translation from Bergman, 1968: 54. See also Donner, 1975: 159; Phillips, 1975: 45-47). Instead of offering hope and relief to the people, the Church only instils additional fear and terror. The pictures of Albertus Pictor, for example, were even specifically designed to frighten the people. The speech of the fanatic flagellant, comparable to the one by father Paneloux in Camus' *La Peste*, after a horrible show of people torturing themselves and others, only intends to scare the people by claiming that their last hour may be at hand as Death is visible everywhere (Gado, 1986: 198; on the speech, see also Paden, 1998: 287-305). The Church is also looking for scapegoats for the plague, burning a young girl as a witch. However, where she claimed to know and see the Devil, she is burned with nothing but emptiness in her eyes. And Raval, the Churches' representative, a 'Doctor Mirabilis, Coelestis et Diabilis' of the theological faculty of Roskilde, and also the one who convinced Block and Jöns to take up the Cross, proves to be nothing more than a thief and a rapist in the end. However, although Antonius Block is struggling to find meaning in life, he does not become a François de Cortemare who goes defies God and continually goes deeper in the Hell of his own making. *The Seventh Seal* is not about the feeling of absolute meaninglessness of life or the horror of the reality of death, but in fact about how to deal with the 'terror of emptiness *in life*' (Gado, 1986: 196). After a long search, Block does find meaning in life.

In the company of the travelling artists who Block and Jöns meet along the road, Block will again find beauty and meaning in life. The artists, Jof and Mia (usually read as Joseph and Maria) and their son Mikael (usually seen as related with the Archangel Michael) can be seen as two big children, pure and joyful who are living life to the fullest with love and kindness, which is contrasted with Block who is constantly questioning everything. This is reflected in the cinematography of Gunnar Fisher, who slightly overexposed the scenes of the artists, contrasting these scenes with the darker ones where Block and Death are the main focus. The simple life and the caring

love that surrounds this holy family is what makes life worthwhile. In other words, where Block cannot find God in his life, he does find an earthly equivalent. Especially the moment when Mia offers a bowl of wild strawberries and milk, seen as a secular version of the Holy Communion (Woods, 2014: 84; Donner, 1975: 157; Stubbs, 1975: 62 & 68; Steene, 1975b: 95), to Antonius Block is the moment where he starts to find meaning in life:[80]

> I shall remember this moment. The silence, the twilight, the bowls of strawberries and milk, your faces in the evening light. Mikael sleeping, Jof with his lyre. I'll try to remember what we have talked about. I'll carry this memory between my hands as carefully as if it were a bowl filled to the brim with fresh milk. [...] And it will be an adequate sign – it will be enough for me. (Translation from Bergman, 1968: 54-55)

This symbolic use of wild strawberries is no coincidence and refers to *Wild Strawberries* which Bergman had made shortly before. In this film, the moment where the main character Isaak Borg receives wild strawberries was one of the most meaningful moments in his life. When Block suspects that Death is planning to take the travelling artists, he stalls Him again by knocking over the chessboard and giving the artist family the opportunity to escape (Marty, 2001: 151; Stubbs, 1975; 68; Donner, 1975: 158). Although knocking over the chessboard had sealed Block's fate which means there is no escaping the medieval world for him, he has found beauty and meaning in life in the simple joy of the artist's family. It is these artists, as Woods (2014: 79) wrote, who will be 'the embodiment of our eternal hope for the future'. Perhaps not coincidentally, in *Revelations* 12, following up on the silence when the Seventh Seal has been broken in *Revelation* 8: 1-5, it is the Archangel Michael (Mikael) who fights and is victorious over Satan (Gado, 1986: 209-210).

b) A Post 9-11 Plague in Black Death

A film combining the cultural meaning of the disintegrating society with the plague as a biological weapon is Christopher Smith's *Black Death* (2010). In this film, set in the year 1348, a band of soldiers is sent out by the bishop to hunt down and kill a necromancer. Rumour has it that a certain remote village, although they have renounced God and are led by a necromancer, is 'beyond death's icy grasp' thereby succeeding where God and the catholic Church failed miserably. Fearing that the people, inspired by this example, may 'look beyond God or the Church for answers', the bishop orders a group of soldiers to go looking for that particular village. Though they are officially only sent out to 'investigate', the soldiers' true aim is to eliminate

[80] According to Holland (1959: 269) strawberries are also 'associated with the Virgin in some late northern iconography'.

that threat. In the end we even learn that Ulric, a religious fanatic and leader of the group, was in fact on a suicide mission as he was already contaminated with the plague and his only mission was to reach the village and spread the plague by his presence (and death) alone. As his last words just before being executed are: 'I am Death. Vengeance is Mine'. The plague here is used as bio-*terrorism*, as Ulric, motivated by his religious ideals, is looking to wipe out this village of heretics and infidels in order to achieve his objective.

The idea of the plague as a biological weapon already existed in the fourteenth century. Although more recently considered to be 'apocryphal' (Aberth, 2003: 197) or 'the stuff of legend' (Noymer, 2007: 623), many authors follow the much quoted chronicle of Gabriel De Mussis, a fourteenth-century notary from Piacenza, where he describes the moment when the Black Death arrived in Europe. In October 1347 a Genoese ship entered the port of Messina in Sicily carrying the plague stricken bodies of its crew, after which the Black Death started its devastating passage through Europe. De Mussis writes that these dead sailors were refugees from Kaffa, a city in the Crimea now called Feyodosia, that shortly before was besieged by the Tartars. When the plague coming from the East struck the Tartar army they, in what is one of the first recorded acts of biological warfare in history, threw their dead over the walls of Kaffa thereby introducing the plague inside the city and causing the remaining Genoese defendants to flee (Benedictow, 2004: 52; Wheelis, 2002: 971-975).[81]

The plague is used in a similar way in *Black Death* as it is Ulric's mission to get the plague inside the village of the necromancer. This mission lies close to a feudal construct of the Church that does not shy away from violence to protect its influence and privileged position. To complete the (stereo)typical construct of the Dark Ages the Church is also constructed as a dogmatic Church. In an interview (in The Gravedigger, 2011), Christopher Smith, director of the film, whether or not consciously, seems to quote Jules Michelet almost literally when explaining his vision

[81] It was not the last time it was reported that the plague was used as a militarised biological weapon. In 1422 the Lithuanians catapulted their dead and cartloads of excrements on their enemies during the battle of Carolstein, just as the Russians did in their campaign against Sweden in Reval in 1710. Even modern countries experimented with the militarised use of the Black Death as for example Japan deliberately introduced the plague in Manchuria in 1932 or dropped the plague from planes in 1940 over Chuhsien in China and in 1941 in the Suiyan and Ninghsia provinces thereby introducing the plague to these regions (Ligon, 2006: 167-169; Zietz and Dunkelberg, 2004: 165 & 175-176; Roussos, 2002: 127; Cohn Jr., 2002: 703).

This concept of the Black Death as a military weapon has also found its way into popular culture. In Sir Arthur Conan Doyle's Sherlock Holmes story *The Giant Rat of Sumatra*, for example, professor Moriarty tries to unleash hell onto Britain by importing plague infested rats from southeast Asia, the place where the last great plague epidemic in history took place (see Aberth, 2003: 200). The plague in Paul Verhoeven's *Flesh+Blood* (1985) is a direct reflection of this account by De Mussis. When Martin and his entourage have found refuge in a castle, they are besieged by Steven Arnolfini and captain Hawkwood. As it proves to be impossible to capture the stronghold, Hawkwood kills a dog infected with plague, cuts it into pieces and hurls it over the walls into the castle. Again, this proves to be successful as it spreads the plague inside the castle walls and ends the siege.

on the dogmatic side of the Church: 'They [the Church] were going through this crisis because the plague was killing half the population, people would go to church and say 'Can you help us' and they'd say: 'Yes, go to church more and pray more', and that didn't work. […] The people were caught up in this quandary.' According to Michelet this led people to turn away from the Church to look for people with real answers who, in the romantic tradition of witchcraft, often were the wise women from the woods. For this reason the people from the village in the film have gathered under Langiva, the wise woman of the woods or the 'necromancer' according to the Church, who seemed able to protect the village from the plague (see supra, 4.2.2a, p. 178).

By using the plague in the context of religious violence and biological warfare, its meaning seems to be closely related to the contemporary post 9-11 context. Smith explicitly labelled his film as a 'meditation on what it is to be a fundamentalist and how fundamentalism can be used by people and how religion could be used by the wrong people in the wrong hands that corrupt innocent people. I think that's very relevant today' (Nemiroff, 2011a). In fact, the narrative of the film could be seen as a *radicalisation narrative* which focuses on the transformation of the protagonist into a villain.

This main protagonist of *Black Death* is Osmund, a young monk who volunteered to guide the soldiers to the remote village where the necromancer was believed to live. Despite the dire and brutal times Osmund lives in he is portrayed as one of the few humane characters to which we, as moderns, can relate. This is most obvious at the beginning of the film, when he is torn between his faith for God, implying that he has to stay at the abbey, or his love for his girlfriend Averill who has left town earlier to escape the plague and who is waiting for him in Dentwitch forest.[82] This ability to doubt excludes him from being a fanatic and portrays him as a humane character able to both love the divine and the earthly. In the end the choice is made for him as suddenly soldiers arrive at the abbey who ask for a guide. As the route for the soldiers coincides with where he was supposed to meet with Averill, he eagerly accepts the mission. In other words, Osmund does not volunteer in order to take out a necromancer, but out of love for Averill. Also during the mission he distances himself from the violent motives of the soldiers. During a nightly conversation with Ulric, the religious fanatical leader of the group, Osmund demonstrates his more rational mind by explicitly doubting the mission as he believes that 'hunting necromancers and demons serves men more than it serves God'. He seems to imply that the Church is only trying to maintain its power by violently oppressing any potential doubt.

[82] The reviewer of *Sight & Sound* (Trilling, 2010: 64) made a remarkable link between the town of the abbey and World War II: 'In an early scene, we watch Osmund survey the destruction wrought on his town by the plague: bodies lie piled in the streets, the camera skating over emaciated and decaying limbs. One can't help but draw parallels with footage of WWII concentration camps.'

The film will demonstrate that Osmund, despite his rational and humane mindset, remains vulnerable to the medieval circumstances in which he lives. In the end, it is shown how even he in the end became a religious fanatic. The reason for this change lies in the events that take place once the soldiers reach the remote village. When Osmund meets Langiva, the so-called necromancer and leader of the village, she immediately starts to play mental tricks on him. She tells him that shortly before he arrived at the village they found the body of Averill in the woods. When she shows him her dead body, this causes Osmund much grief and anger. Similar to François de Cortemare, he directs his anger towards God ('Why have you taken her') and he feels guilty because he thinks he has betrayed her. Langiva makes use of Osmund's grief and goes a step further by claiming that she, as a necromancer, can resurrect Averill from the dead. Not much later, during a staged ritual, she indeed convinces Osmund that she has brought Averill back to life. However, as Osmund thinks that it was witchcraft that brought Averill back from the dead, he considers her resurrected body as unnatural and unholy, and kills her. However, contrary to Von Tunzelman (2012) who claimed that Averill indeed was a zombie, the witchcraft of Langiva is not real. She only used her knowledge of herbs and plants to drug Averill so she looked dead when Osmund first saw her, and just woke her to convince Osmund that she had resurrected her. When Osmund finds out about this truth and learns that it is he who actually killed Averill, his heart turns bitterly cold.

From then on vengeance is the only thing that drives him. Just as Etienne de Bourbon, but in fact more like François de Cortemare, Osmund falls prey to the medieval conditions and becomes a part of medieval society.[83] The context of superstition, fanaticism, intolerance and violence has chilled Osmund's heart and has made him conform to his surroundings. At the end of *Black Death*, Osmund becomes a cruel inquisitor in order to seek revenge for what has been done to him. Following the rationalist tradition on witchcraft, blinded by his hate Osmund tortures and burns every young and beautiful girl he sees believing it is Langiva. But despite many executions, it is left unclear whether or not he succeeded in tracking down and killing Langiva. What is emphasised, however, is the violence, absurdity and cruelty of the Inquisition contrasted with the innocence of the accused girls.

The rationale behind this narrative scheme was for Christopher Smith to demonstrate how vulnerable people can be when they are continually exposed to extreme circumstances, in this case religious fundamentalism. Osmund is exposed to a charismatic and fanatic Ulric who would not doubt to march into hell if necessary for he thinks God travels with him. When Osmund is later heavily hurt by Langiva in

[83] Before Osmund left to guide the soldiers, the abbot warned him against Ulric which proved to be true: 'Osmund, that man is more dangerous than pestilence'. The abbot is, despite being a cleric, a tolerant and rational man; he does not see a sign of God when a village is said to have mastered the pest, but talks of superstition.

the village, he radicalises as well. In fact, the starting point for Smith to make this film was 'How does anyone become someone who goes around burning witches?'

> It was always the intention to do it that way. In the beginning he's a monk but like a modern Christian. He believes he can love God and a woman. The two were not clashing. And everything he tries to do to make that happen is taken away from him, so much so that goes through so many horrendous decisions on this journey that by the end he becomes the Sean Bean character [Ulric]. (In The Gravedigger, 2011).

Osmund is made into an example of what – even modern – men may become when they are confronted with extreme circumstances, for example in case of fundamentalism: either they die or they 'adapt':

> I used fear of fundamentalism and I started the film with a young moderate Christian character who wants to love god and love a woman at the same time and by the end of the film he is radicalized into something different. […] I knew that if I told the story straight and used the violence in a very convincing way, then you can see how things have not changed in 600 years. (Christopher Smith in Tehrani, 2011)

In a first version of the script by Dario Poloni this meditation on fundamentalism was not present as the evil in the second half of the film was planned to be *real*. This, however, would have made the film into a more conventional supernatural horror film. Christopher Smith, after being added to project to replace the original director Geoffrey Sax (according to imdb.com), changed this setting from the supernatural to *reality*. This made it possible for him to focus on the effects of religious fanaticism rather than constructing a classical opposition between a good protagonist and an evil village (Tehrani, 2011).

This link between the plague and religious violence also emphasised the contagious character of violence and intolerance. This is further demonstrated in the film as also the characters of Ulric and Langiva can be seen as victims as well. Langiva lost her husband and child by the hands of the Christians and it is suggested that Ulric lost his wife and child in a similar context. Both stopped to see the beauty and goodness in the world and devoted their lives to vengeance. The way the church is deceiving their flock with violence is similar to Langiva who deceives her villagers by means of 'magic'. Langiva is not only an example of a 'witch' in the romantic tradition, but she also deliberately uses her knowledge of nature to deceive her villagers by constructed spectacles. Just as the Church deceives the people, and uses violence if necessary, Langiva does exactly the same. The logic *Black Death* is implicitly evoking is that violence creates violence and the harder the violence, the more fanatic and fundamentalist the victims may become.

The plague-stricken-world of *Black Death* is seen as a reflection of contemporary pessimism related to the issue of fundamentalist religious violence and the possible use of biological weapons or weapons of mass destruction. As Smith (in Wixson, 2011) said on the fourteenth century: 'So much of what made that time

period fascinating to me was because of how crazy the times were and now to see what has changed in the last 600 years and what, at its core, has not changed at all'. Similar to *The Seventh Seal*, society in *Black Death* is at the brink of collapse as flagellants wander around the countryside, the dead remain unburied and piled up in the streets and desperate and hysterical villagers are looking for scapegoats accusing (female) townspeople of witchcraft before torturing and burning them. Smith has acknowledged this influence of Bergman, and added that he also considered *The Name of the Rose* (Annaud 1986) and *Aguirre, the Wrath of God* (Herzog 1972) to be influential as these films explore the mindset, the motivations and the psychology of the characters (in The Gravedigger, 2011). The character of the mute soldier Ivo, for example, is a visual reference to Don Lope de Aguirre as played by Klaus Kinski in *Aguirre, the Wrath of God*. This reference seems to be mostly tributary.

Contrary to the pessimistic vision of the film, the *Black Death* does not end in a stale-mate pessimistic view on how violence creates violence and offers a way out. During the film the character of Wolfstan, one of the soldiers on the mission, evolves from a begin a soldier under command of Ulric to a humane, rational and tolerant character. In fact contrary to Osmund, it could be said that his character evolves in the opposite direction. Where at the beginning of the film he believed that the necromancer was a devil to which violence was God's cure (for that monologue, see supra, 4.1.1, p. 137), at the end of the film, having witnessed Osmund's metamorphosis into a cruel inquisitor, his mind has changed:

> There is nothing beautiful or uplifting in returning people to god. There is no place in heaven for those who kill. The pestilence claimed no higher purpose and those who had survived our swords that day soon fell foul of it sight. They were not protected by the witch. They were simply remote. And when the pestilence crossed the march, it killed them too. […] I never saw him [Osmund] again. But I heard stories. Dark Stories. That in the years that followed, Osmund's heart turned cold. That in the shadow of his grief he found a hate and that in God's name he took op the sword and vengeance became his creed. [Images of the torturing of a supposed Langiva.] Some say he found the witch. And that he tortured her and burned her. Others say it was never her. It was only her guilt he saw in the eyes of the accused. [Arresting another supposed Langiva and burning her]. I like to think that he found peace. That he continued to see beauty in the world. Goodness.

5.1.2 Designer Death and the Coming of Modernity

> Auf Grund dieses Schemas wagen wir nun die Behauptung aufzustellen: das Konzeptionsjahr des Menschen der Neuzeit war das Jahr 1348, das Jahr der "schwarzen Pest".
>
> E. Friedell, *Kulturgeschichte der Neuzeit*, 1927-31 (1965), p. 63.

When a plague-stricken world was brought to the screen in the previous section it was used as a stage on which we could project our modern deep-rooted fear and pessimism, such as Bergman's feeling of existential angst or Christopher Smith's world where religious fanaticism and violence could terrorise and contaminate society. What unites these films is that they focus on a time during which the plague spreads its terror as it strikes society indiscriminatingly as well as collectively. Three films, *The Pied Piper, The Advocate* and *Anazapta*, in which the plague plays a significant role, diverge from this tradition and need additional attention. In these films the plague only strikes at the end of the story, which means that the focus of these films does not lie on the terror and fear the plague evokes in society. These three films seem to be more interested in placing the Black Death into a larger scheme, which means that in order to understand what these films are doing we need to broaden the scope and focus on the (perceived) consequences of the Black Death on Western-Europe.

Historically, on the short term it is clear that the plague deeply scarred the mentality of the population as can be attested from the contemporary fascination with death and dying (Marshall, 1994: 487; Ziegler, 1969: 267-288), which was mostly visible in the arts as Meiss (1951) argued in his analysis of late-Trecento Tuscan painting. However, these effects have to be seen in a broader context as the Black Death was preceded by two great famines, in 1315 and 1317, and was followed by smaller plague outbursts of which the cumulative effect on the population cannot be underestimated (Marshall, 1994: 486; Carpentier, 1962: 1081-1082).[84] Additionally, in France the devastation brought by the plague was even aggravated by the Hundred Year's War (1337-1453). However, at the same time historical evidence also points out that society restored itself relatively fast and attested renewed energy and vitality, sometimes to the point of decadence. The same ambivalence can be seen in religion shortly after the Black Death: on the one hand the people were disappointed by the inability of the Church to avert God's wrath, while at the same time the construction of many new churches indicates a revival of religiosity.

[84] In case of Italy there is evidence of additional eruptions in 1361-1363, 1373-1375, 1383-1384, 1389-1391 and 1399-1400. Especially the outbreak of 1361 which killed another ten percent of the remaining population, of which curiously enough mostly children. This is often explained by the idea that the surviving population of the Black Death was more resistant to the disease, which the children obviously were not (Noymer, 2007: 625).

On the long term the question is whether the Black Death initiated fundamental changes in Western-European society or merely functioned as a catalyst for already existing evolutions that were bound to happen anyhow. Especially the thesis of Thorold Rogers who claimed that the plague ended feudalism in favour of capitalism has stirred a lot of debate. According to this thesis the high mortality had made labour more scarce which forced the lords to give better conditions to the workers who, as a consequence of the relative high mobility in the fourteenth century, could more easily look for better conditions elsewhere (in *The Reckoning*, just before Martin interrogates the mute woman in prison, we learn that a man has been imprisoned because he had left the lands of his lord to work for another lord. As this film takes place shortly after the Black Death, it fits this discourse). As a result, the aspirations of the working class became higher which has been linked to the Jacquerie of 1358 in France, the Peasant Revolution of 1381 in England, and the Ciompi rebellion of 1378 in Italy. Historians of the *Annales* on the other hand, focusing on the *longue durée*, argued that these evolutions were bound to happen anyway and that the plague at best only accelerated these events. In addition, research based on local municipal records, as for example Emery's (1967: 620-621) study of Perpignan or Carpentier's (1962: 1064) study of Orvieto suggest that the occurrence of the plague not necessarily led to a 'prolonged period of social breakdown' and that there even was 'a considerable degree of resiliency' discernible from the records which indicates that the impact of the plague in some cases should not be overestimated (see also Benedictow, 2004: 393; Ziegler, 1969: 240-259; Herlihy and Kline, 1997; Bowsky, 1964). However, as Cohn (2007: 457) points out, it remains important to take regional differences into account. Additionally, where it has been claimed that the Black Death ended the Middle Ages (Creighton, 1891: 1), it is also claimed to have been the cradle of the Renaissance (Cantor, 2003: 232-252).

a) The Silver Lining of the Plague

As Crosby (1998: 126; see also Mengel, 2011: 26) noted, claiming direct causality between events of the mid-fourteenth century and the fifteenth or sixteenth century is always a bit tendentious and may in fact be more revealing a personal philosophy of history rather than history itself. Rather than analysing the evidence of the events in the fourteenth century, many authors have tried to make sense of the Black Death by giving it a place in history. Before plague studies would become a large domain in the last four decades of the twentieth century, it took until the mid-nineteenth century before the plague became a scholarly topic when the 1830 cholera-epidemics triggered the attention for epidemiology (Benedictow, 2004: 5; Aberth, 2003: 199-

201; Getz, 1991: 266 & 274-275; Bulst, 1979; Biraben and Le Goff, 1969: 1485). Seen within the context of the nineteenth century the first plague scholars, amongst whom Justin Hecker was the most prominent, would see history from a perspective of progress implying that the plague had its silver lining and acted as an underlying force in history that brought change and progress. More than wars or politics, it were these great epidemics that truly influenced the course of history. As Hecker wrote: 'by annihilations they awaken new life, and when the tumult above and below the earth is past, nature is renovated, and the mind awakens from torpor and depression to the consciousness of an intellectual existence' (in Getz, 1991: 227). By bringing this topic under attention Hecker is said to be 'the founder of the Gothic Epidemiology' characterised firstly by the idea that the plague was a turning point for the better, secondly by the idea of the Black Death as a natural phenomenon both terrible and seductive in its sheer magnitude, making Black Death, thirdly, a moment for the best and for the worst. Fourthly, the Gothic Epidemiology is characterised by the attention for the social and often morbid impact of the plague, which is why Hecker was also the first to bring the flagellants and the persecutions of the Jews under attention (Mengel, 2011: 25-27; Getz, 1991: 279).

These ideas proved to be very influential and it would not take long before this became inscribed in a Hegelian philosophy of history. Egon Friedell (1878-1938), for example, in his *Kulturgeschichte der Neuzeit* (1927-1931), was seeking for the deeper meaning or the metaphysical lines in history comparable to what Oswald Spengler (1880-1936) or Arnold Toynbee (1889-1975) did, but without their pessimism. Although Friedell (1965: 3 & 19) claimed to be non-scientific and explicitly wrote that he would exaggerate in order to enhance the dramatic effect, he was one of the first to explicitly inscribe the plague in a larger historical scheme. In his vision the Black Death resulted in a 'traumatische Neurose' amongst the population which was for him 'der eigentliche Brutherd des Neuen' as it triggered medieval man to think and become modern. The 'Neuzeit' for Friedell can be equalled to 'die Geschichte der Welteroberung durch den menschlichen Verstand' which would only come to an end with another great trauma of the First World War when 'der Mensch beginnt an seinem Verstand zu zweifelen' (see also Polgar, 1950: 416).

This vision of medieval history and the role of the plague is still alive. The *National Enquirer* of May 6th 1986, for example, opened an article on the plague with: 'The horrifying Black Death wiped out more than 55 million people in Europe during the Middle Ages – but the catastrophe changed the world forever by giving birth to the Renaissance' (in Getz, 1991: 266). In the next section we argue that three films have to be analysed as a cinematic echo of this idea.

b) A Secular Flood Myth in The Pied Piper, The Advocate *and* Anazapta

We argue that *The Pied Piper*, *The Advocate* and *Anazapta* have to be seen in line with this tradition. These films represent the plague as a the decisive moment when the medieval receded to make way for modern society. This representation of the plague is not as much a reflection of an actual scholarly debate on whether or not the Black Death fundamentally changed medieval society, as it is more related to a Hegelian conception of history, which makes the plague into the required catastrophe to get rid of the Middle Ages. Just as before the plague is not to be seen as a medical disease, but instead of being a social *disease* it can be seen as a social *cure*. However, the way this tradition is specifically translated to the screen is by linking it to the narrative template of the Myth of the Great Flood of *Genesis* 6: 5-8:

> Then the Lord saw that the wickedness of man was great in the earth, and that every intent of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually. And the Lord was sorry that He had made man on the earth, and He was grieved in His heart. So the Lord said: 'I will destroy man whom I have created from the face of the earth, both man and beast, creeping thing and birds of the air, for I am sorry that I have made them'. But Noah found grace in the eyes of the Lord. (Genesis 6: 5-8, NKJV)

Applied to the Black Death it is because medieval man has grown wicked, and every intent of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually, a God-like character is grieved by this and decides that the wicked have to be wiped off the earth, save those who have found favour in the eyes of the God-like character.[85] Just as God saved Noah in order to rebuild and repopulate the earth after it was cleansed of its evil, by killing all the medieval characters, the Black Death opens the door to modernity as only the 'good people' survive. Consequently, the narrative structure of the films under discussion here is quite similar. First, what these three films do is establish the wickedness of medieval man who is only intent at 'evil continually'. The way these films do this is by creating a binary opposition between the main character of the film, an enlightened or proto-modern rational protagonist to whom a contemporary audience can relate, and a dark medieval context. The way the conflict between the medieval and the rational protagonist is resolved, however, is fundamentally different from the other films on the Dark Ages. At the end of each of these three films a character external to medieval society, and with supernatural powers, is personally responsible for spreading the plague which, in contrast with the social plague which is an undifferentiating plague, only strikes those who are responsible for the darkness in medieval society. By only killing those people related with to the darkness of medieval society, the plague is essentially responsible for ending the Middle Ages and enabling the rational protagonists to live in or create a modern society.

[85] Similar to the Greek and Judeo-Christian tradition, the sender of the plague is personified just as Apollo acted as an Avenger in Homer as well as God himself is often a God of Vengeance in the Old Testament (Boeckl, 2000: 14, 37-38 & 154; Crawfurd, 1914: 5 & 19).

First, these films construct a context where the wickedness of medieval man, intent at 'only evil continually', is demonstrated. In *The Pied Piper*, it is the continuous exploitation by the elite of the common people that is shown to be the cause of all evil. As Jacques Demy described the medieval time during which the film was set:

> D'abord elle se situe au Moyen Age. En dehors de tout l'intérêt de la reconstitution de cette période [...] il y a tout le contexte politique. La fin de la féodalité. L'avènement du pouvoir politique donné aux bourgeois. L'obscurantisme religieux au moment où affleure très lointainement le germe de l'humanisme. Le racisme (on croyait réellement alors que les juifs infestaient les puits ou donnaient la peste. (in Amiel, 1976: 104)

Two elements of this construct can be highlighted here as they can serve as a symbol for the evils of the feudal elite. First, there was Franz' idea to let the children of Hamelin fight for the pope, as they die 'as nobly as the next'. Second, there was the execution of Melius for being a Jew, a heretic and a sorcerer, where he in fact was only looking for a cure for the plague (see supra, 3.2.1a & 4.2.2b).

In *The Advocate*, the son of the lord is killing Jewish children but this gets covered up thanks to a legal system that is not designed for justice, but for the elite to maintain their power. This legal system is completely intransparant and absurd to the point where pigs can be trialled as long as this keeps attention away from the wrongdoings of the elite. The Church, represented by father Albertus, is portrayed to be equally guilty as he threatens the people with the prospect of eternal hell if they do not what he says (see supra, 3.2.4).

In *Anazapta*, the general primitiveness and barbarity of medieval society is presented as the continual evil. More specifically, the medieval is construct as a world of sin. The local lord, sir Walter de Mellerby, is similar to Franz in *The Pied Piper*, a warlike person who recently had been captured, which means that the town has to pay for his ransom. The peasants, however, already have to pay so many different taxes that they cannot pay any more. Moreover, the rain in *Anazapta* has ravaged the crops which makes the situation in the village precarious. To make things even worse, if the local lord does not pay his debts to the morbidly obese and sexually perverse bishop, his lands will be forfeited and become domain of the church. However, when Sir Walter's nephew returns from the war, he has brought a prisoner of war with him, Jacques de Saint Amant, whose ransom will be enough to pay the debt to the Church as well as for freeing Sir Walter. However, as the deadline to pay the Church is too close, Mathilda de Mellerby, Walter's wife, has to negotiate new terms with the bishop. The bishop allows this on the condition that if she fails to meet the new deadline she will have to 'humour an old man in forty-seven different ways', referring to the forty-seven pornographic drawings the perverted bishop collects. In other words, *Anazapta*, just as *The Pied Piper*, constructs a textbook feudal society where a warlike lord and an sexually frustrated Bishop are only interested in their own

pleasures, and do not care for the common people. The bishop does not even shy away from murder in order to thwart the plans of Mathilda de Mellerby so he can get his moment with her as well as gain the lands of sir Walter. The crux of the story, however, is an event which took place shortly before Mathilda de Mellerby, the protagonist, became the new wife of Sir Walter. He, as a warlike and misogynist lord, demands of his wife to wear a chastity belt and does with her as he pleases. This is demonstrated in the gruesome history of his first wife. Once, his first wife had an adulterous affair with a man called Thomas Basset, a sin she confessed to the village priest. As the priest was more loyal to his lord than to God, he broke the Sanctity of Confession and informed Sir Walter. He immediately had Thomas Basset hung without trial and offered a nickel to every man of the village who would rape his 'whore of a' wife, an order which was wilfully executed by the people of the village. This gruesome village rape will be the symbolical event of the film that equals the medieval with a barbaric, primitive and sinful society.

Once these films have established a context of inherent and continual evil, a specific event leads a character with God-like powers to trigger the plague. In *The Pied Piper* it is the piper himself, after the burgomaster refuses to pay him the thousand guilders that were promised to him after he got rid of the rats, who spreads the plague.[86] This event differentiates the film from the poem of Robert Browning on which the film was based. In Browning's *The Pied Piper of Hamelin: A Child Story* (1842) the piper only takes away the children when he does not get his promised money. The Mayor and the town council do not want to give the money to the piper as they believe the rats are gone anyhow ('And what's dead can't come to life, I think', r. 166) and with only half the money they owe him they could 'replenish their cellar's biggest butt with Renish' (r. 159-160). In revenge, the piper starts piping again, this time taking the children of Hamelin with him. And although then the Burgomaster was willing to offer 'silver and gold to his heart's content' (r. 265), the piper nor the children will ever return. The relatively simple moral of the story that Browning wrote for the sick ten-year-old William C. Macready Jr., was a reminder to keep the promises one makes:

> There came into many a burgher's pate a text which says that heaven's gate opens to the rich at as easy rate as the needle's eye takes a camel in! […] So, Willy, let me and you be wipers Of scores out with all men – especially pipers! And, whether they pipe us free from rats or from mice, If we've promised them aught, let us keep our promise! (r. 257-260 and r. 300-303)

[86] There is something of a paradox in this. While Melius as a scientist makes every effort to demonstrate that the plague is a disease and not a punishment sent from God and dies for this at the stake, in the end the plague *is* a punishment sent by the Piper as some sort of a higher being. As De la Bretèque (2004: 719) noted, the plague is a complex entity in this film: 'Et la peste? Il n'y a pas de clé unique pour l'interpréter, mais elle a surtout une fonction de révélateur'.

Although the story in the poem can be situated in more or less the same time of the historical Black Death (it was set 'almost five hundred years ago' (r. 7) which would make it ca. 1342), the plague is absent in the story. In the filmic tradition on the pied piper as well the plague is absent, and usually the story ended in a happy end in which the children return (see e.g. the different versions of *The Pied Piper of Hamelin* of 1911, 1912, 1914 or 1957, see Harty, 1999: 212-213). In Demy's version of the story, however, the plague is a central theme. From the opening shot of the film onwards, an establishing long shot, using Demy's favourite iris shot similar to the opening of *Les Parapluis de Cherbourg* (Hill, 2008: 393), a plague-stricken and ravaged countryside is shown. After this, a text appears on the screen: 'Northern Germany. Noon – Midsummer Day – 1349. Year of the Black Death'. Then a group of travelling artists, similar to *The Seventh Seal*, is introduced in the film. This family consisting of a father, his wife, a grandfather and some children will just as *The Seventh Seal* be the heart of the film. Contrary to the poem, in the film the piper does not only take the children with him after the burgomaster's speech, but having saved one rat from drowning, he spreads the plague as well.[87] Contrary to the plague as a social plague which strikes indifferently, the plague in *The Pied Piper* is selectively killing only those responsible for the medieval abuses in the city, of which the warlike son of the lord is the first visible victim, just after the execution of Melius. And the children, innocently dressed in white are led by the piper to an upcoming sun, symbol of new – and better times, a new dawn, a new era, or shortly put: modernity.[88] Except for the children, the only

The Pied Piper leading the children of Hamelin to the rising sun

[87] Additionally, the speech of the burgomaster in the film is much more 'political' than in the story by Browning. Where in the story the burgomaster and the town council simply break their promise in order to save money and buy wine, in the film the burgomaster is rhetorically twisting and turning his way out of his promise ('A thousand guilders? Impossible! […] It's all very well, but surely you can't pretend it's worth a thousand guilders.' When the piper accuses him of breaking his word, the Burgomaster answers: 'Word? What word? Did I swear? Did I promise? I mean to say everyone would like a thousand guilders. What about all these good citizens? What about the poor, the unfortunate, the sick, what about them? We're not thieves, you know. We're willing to pay a fair price let's say, uh, fifty guilders? That's pretty good for an evening's work, isn't it piper?' Contrary to Demy's predilection for the bourgeoisie (Hill, 2008: 384), in *The Pied Piper* the Burgomaster and the town council are part of the problem.

[88] This ending confused the critic of *Films & Filming*, who no longer knew whether or not these children were abducted, killed or saved (Stuart, 1973: 49). The film diverges considerably from the literary tradition on the Piper as well. According to the story, on the 26th of June 1284 a man came to the town of Hamelin offering his services to free the city of mice and rats. When they agreed on a sum, he lured all the mice and rats of the town by sounding his pipe to the river Weser. As the rats followed him while he stepped in the river, they all drowned. When the Piper wanted to collect the money that was promised to him, the townspeople cancelled to contract. Infuriated by this, he later came back and

people who survive are the protagonists: Gavin, the artistic pupil of the Jewish scientist and a group of travelling artists who are heading to Holland as the promise of the Golden Age that is to come. Against the literary tradition on the piper, he is no longer a 'cheated journeyman who exacts a terrible revenge', nor is he 'seducer of the young', or even a 'mysterious and sinister sorcerer who lures the susceptible to disaster by the irresistible sweetness and charm of his spell' (Queenan, 1978: 104). He has become a hero who delivered us from the medieval. Similar to the tradition he is an outsider, a gypsy, and therefore a threat to sedentary community (Arnds, 2012: 67) as he enters the film mysteriously and his character is never fully revealed. He joined the travelling artists at night in the forest, having come from Hamburg where the plague was already present. It is left open whether or not, as will by suggested in a film like *Anazapta*, if the piper was responsible for the plague there as well.

When in *The Advocate* the protagonist has grown tired of how things go in the country village of Abbeville and wants to return to Paris, a knight in shining armour appears, which seems to be fulfilment of a prophecy made earlier in the film (see supra, 3.2.4b and 4.2.1b). When the woman, who was unjustly condemned of witchcraft and served as a symbol for the unjust judiciary in the film, was about to be hanged, she addresses the people. But instead of cursing them for the wrong they are doing to her, she leaves them with a *blessing*:

> There will come a fine knight in armour that shines like the sun. And he will carry the weapons of strength and righteousness. And he'll deliver you from your lying and your evil and make this a fit place for all of you.

At the end, the stranger who appears is indeed a knight dressed in armour that shines like the sun, but the weapons of strength and righteousness that have to deliver the village from its evil is the plague. When the knight is stripped from his armour, the servant girl discovers the signs of the plague on his body after which the following text is shown on the screen:

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lured 130 children out of the city and into the mountains with him by again sounding his pipe. Depending on the version the Piper and the children vanished on the Koppenberg or even went to Transylvania, in both cases never to be seen again. One of the main issues on the historical authenticity of the story is that there are no contemporary accounts that mention these events in Hamelin. There are, however, many theories on what could have happened. Some argue that the Piper really was Nicholas of Cologne who led thousands of youngsters in what became known as the Children's Crusade of 1212. Others believe that it was a new outbreak of bubonic plague, and as the elders were immune thanks to surviving a prior outbreak, it were the children who were most affected by it. According to Dirickx (1980), it was an outbreak of murine typhus, thought of the Piper to be a personification of the disease and the place in the mountain where the children disappeared to be some sort of mass grave. Was it a consequence of a military expedition against the Bishop of Minden which resulted in a great defeat at the Battle of Sedemünde (1260)? Or were the 130 youngsters recruited by an emissary of the emperor Rudolph von Habsburg to populate territories in Moravia he had conquered in 1284, which seems related to the version in which the piper and the children go to Transylvania (Queenan, 1978: 107-114; Gutch, 1892: 232-238).

> The Black Death finally reached Ponthieu, carried there by an unknown traveller. According to the legend, he was a wandering Knight-at-arms. While Courtois made his name in Paris, Mathieu his clerk, having escaped the ravages of the plague, gave up the law. With his wife, the maidservant Maria, he moved to Joinville and became landlord of the local inn. Thus did Mathieu prosper and against all odds, finally settle for the quiet country life. …

This rider closely resembles the fourth rider of the Apocalypse, after Conquest (sometimes identified as pestilence as he is represented with a bow and arrows), war, famine and Death. In the arts this theme, referring to Revelations 6: 1-8, is perhaps most famous in Dürer's *Tod und Teufel* (1513), but in *The Advocate* this horseman will be a blessing to the people. Woods (2002: 57) called the knight in shining armour to be a 'liberator', finishing off what Courtois as a rational lawyer could not do. Just as in *The Pied Piper*, the plague in Abbeville is spread by a character from outside society, whose coming was foretold, and the plague only punishes those responsible for the darkness of the medieval society. The plague, therefore, is no punishment nor revenge of the 'witch', but indeed a blessing: a blessing for the Western society.

In *Anazapta*, it is the prisoner of war, Jacques de Saint Amant, who is responsible for spreading the plague. The film suggests that he is not really a prisoner of war, but that he planned to be in the village exactly one year after the first wife of the Lord, Joan Basset, was raped by the village. While Joan was being raped, she yelled out 'Anazapta', which was a charm against sickness, and claimed that she would be avenged ('My soul will not rest! You will choke on my blood!'). Nine months later, she dies while giving birth to a boy, who gets branded with a cross on his chest. And as Jacques de Saint Amant also has a red cross on his chest, it would appear that he is the reckoning for the village's sinful past. This is reinforced by the fact that his amulet, which he got from his mother, is inscribed with the words 'Agnus Dei qui tollis peccata mundi' ('Behold the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world') from *John* 1:29. This makes him into a perverse Christ-character who takes the sins of the world, by killing the sinful. Just as the raped mother warned the village that they would choke on her blood, the plague is spread through the cup that holds Christ's blood during communion in the mass that the bishop presides over.[89] Jacques takes his revenge by spreading the plague, but similar to the other films, the plague only strikes those related to the crimes committed against his mother. As a monk tells in the film, there is a 'certain design' behind the plague, it is an 'eloquent' disease who 'chooses its victims with precision'. Only two people survive: the caring and humanistic Mathilda and her servant Randall (who in fact helped the wife of the Lord

[89] Additionally, some people die as 'collateral damage' during the film due to direct reasons such as mistreating Jacques (Nicholas), attempting murder (the Bishop's servant) and the scheming and perverse Bishop himself. In one occasion, Jacques de Saint Amant is accused of spreading the plague by looking at a man passing. While we, as a modern audience, would not believe this reasoning, it was believed during the Middle Ages that the plague could be communicated by a look, or even by the belongings of a person (Aberth, 2003: 205; Crawfurd, 1914: 116).

after being raped). But where the narrative of the film only seems to be a classical revenge story, a twist at the end the film gives the whole film a different dimension. After the so-called 'village-bastard' completed his revenge, he leaves town and during his long walk he seems to change his identity and appearance. At some point, he arrives at another village where he is recognised and greeted under the new name of 'William'. Then the film stops and shows this text:

> For a whole year an all-destroying pestilence spread across England. By the end of 1349 the living were hardly ably to bury the dead. Almost half the population died.

The man is after all not the son of a brutalised woman, but rather the incarnation of the Reckoning, an Angel of Vengeance who has been set out to wipe out all the sins of the medieval period – which comes down to nothing less than killing half of the population. This gives another meaning to the word 'Anazapta', as a charm against *sickness*: it implies that the medieval can be seen as a sickness, to which the plague was its cure. This may also give extra meaning to the red cross on the chest of the Avenger as this is also one of the characteristics of St. Roch, who is next to St. Sebastian one of the main medieval patron saints against the plague (Marshall, 1994: 500-506; Crawfurd, 1914: 105-107). But the Saint Roch-like figure of *Anazapta* is not here to protect us from the plague, as he is protecting us from the medieval by spreading the plague.[90]

5.1.3 Iconography of the Plague

In this section we will focus on how the plague is shown on the screen. As the plague was absent in Europe between the eighth and fourteenth century and its symptoms are difficult to characterise, it would take until the fourteenth century before there became evidence of plague-related themes in the visual arts (Boeckl, 2000: 1). Shortly after the massive outburst in the fourteenth century a rich iconography would develop with a plethora of different possibilities of representing the plague. Examples of this plague iconography are the sheathing of a sword, a depiction of the good and bad angel at the door, arrows, plague saints like for example St. Roch and St. Sebastian, the *madonna misericordia*, the dance macabre, people smoking to avert the smell as well as the possible infection, a dead or dying mother with infant as made popular in Raphael's *The Plague of Phrygia*, all kinds of personalising Pestilence (e.g.

[90] In *The Reckoning*, Thomas Wells, the boy who was murdered and abused by Lord De Guise, was also stricken with the plague. It could be argued that if the artists had not incited the village to revolt, he would have been killed by the plague as well. It is a variant on the theme of the plague as a rightful avenger. For the rest of the film, the plague is mostly used as a signifier for the hard times during which the people in the fourteenth century had to live.

the Grim Reaper) and of course the characteristic buboes on the plague stricken body (Gomel, 2000; Boeckl, 2000; Marshall, 1994; Girard, 1974; Keys, 1944; Crawfurd, 1914). For a long time these images functioned mostly in the context of religious art or as to 'secure protection from the plague by soliciting the intervention of some powerful heavenly protector' or put shortly 'manipulating the sacred' (Marshall, 1994: 487-488). In the sixteenth century, post-Tridentine art also made the link between the plague and heresy, as both were deadly for the body as well as the soul, which was still visible in the seventeenth century (Boeckl, 1996: 986 & 994). With the coming of the Enlightenment, linked to a gradual disappearance of plague eruptions in Europe, the plague became less visible in the arts. Not coincidentally, the last religious plague painting was commissioned just after the last plague outburst in Europe in Marseille in 1721. From then on, the meaning of the plague in the visual arts became also more and more secularised, as for example in Antoine-Jean Gros' *Bonaparte Visiting the Plague-Stricken in Jaffa* (1804) where patriotism and propaganda were the main motives behind the painting (Boeckl, 2000: 2).

The films under discussion here are also to be seen in the secularising trend on representing the plague. Next, we will discuss the three major plague-related visual expressions of the plague: the buboes, flagellants and the plague doctors.

Gruesome buboes under the armpit in *Anazapta*

First, the plague in films on the Dark Ages is almost exclusively evoked in its physical aspect, or more specifically in the buboes. Although the plague bacteria *yersinia pestis* can manifest itself without buboes in its *pneumoncic* or *septicaemic* variant, it are the visible buboes on the body that function as the dominant visual signifier for the plague. These buboes, as famously described in the introduction of Boccaccio's *Decameron*, are in fact enlargements of the lymph nodes that are usually located in the groin, armpit or the neck – depending on the location of the flee bite (Boeckl, 2000: 11 & 18). Mostly there is one bubo that becomes visible three to five days after the bite (Noymer, 2007: 619; Theilmann and Cate, 2007: 378). Almost all the films use the bubo as the signifier for a plague stricken body, although there is variance on how gruesomely they are depicted. The specific depiction is mostly related to the film's genre. In *The Seventh Seal*, for example, the plague in its physical form is only visible in the paintings by Albertus Pictor. In *The Pied Piper*, the Black Death is visualised by a black spot on the head and in *The Advocate* the disease is represented by means of smaller, but more numerous buboes all over the body. However, in *Black Death* as well as *Anazapta*, both horror

films, the buboes are large and gruesome to look at. In *Anazapta*, next to the typical buboes, the arm of one of the plague stricken bodies has totally turned black, an image most likely used for its terrifying look and the accompanying shock-effect. This depiction is in fact based upon an old belief that the body of a plague stricken victim turned entirely black shortly before dying. However, although this is often believed, this has nothing to do with why the Black Death is called the 'black' death. In the sixteenth century, and consequently also not during the Middle Ages, the term Black Death was not known. It is mostly believed that a erroneous translation of the Latin 'atra mors' was responsible for the term as 'atra' can mean 'black' as well as 'terrible' which was probably the intended meaning (Noymer, 2007: 616; Benedictow, 2004: 3; Ziegler, 1969: 18).

There are in fact two films that, apart from the buboes, use a wider range of plague iconography. First, *The Seventh Seal* famously uses the *Danse Macabre*, to be seen on the wall in the church and during the last scene when Death takes Antonius Block and his companions. The oldest Danse Macabre known to us, as found on the churchyard of the Innocent in Paris, was painted in 1434 but was probably not the first (Fein, 2000: 1; Crawfurd, 1914: 133-136). However, although many authors have ascribed the origins of the Danse Macabre as a reaction to the epidemic of the fourteenth century (Eisler, 1948), it is also possible that the Black Death only reinforced its use but that it existed prior to the epidemic. This could be explained by dogmatic changes installed by the pope with regard to the timing of the final judgement, which became right after death instead of being postponed till Judgement Day itself (Boeckl, 2000: 69-90 & 158). Second, in *Anazapta* there is the marking in the shape of a red cross on the chest of the protagonist which is also one of the defining characteristics of the plague saint St. Roch. Also the dark clouds gathering at the beginning of the film, besides their function as to create a gloomy and threatening atmosphere, can be seen as a rendering of the miasmatic theory where dark air indicates pestilential air (Boeckl, 2000: 47).

A second element inherently connected to the plague are the lines of men walking behind each other and heavily chastising the man who walks in front of them as way of doing penitence for their sins which provoked the plague. These men are better known as flagellants. This movement, despite its religious fervour, had in reality nothing to do with the church – as an institute. The flagellants were a laic movement, that existed between 1348 and 1350, that in fact stood up against the Church as they could do

The Flagellants in *The Seventh Seal*

nothing to protect them from the plague. By skipping the Church as an intermediary level, the flagellants sought God directly. They moved in procession, walking in lines of two which made their lines seem endless, singing hymns walking from town to town. Ironically this mobility helped spreading the plague to wherever they went. In every town they displayed a showcase of horror, usually attracting large crowds to which they gave a sermon. It were also the flagellants who reacted most strongly against the Jews and organised pogroms. Because they were very popular, pope Clement had to tolerate them until 1350 until he could formally forbid them, and consequently have them expelled and persecuted (Nohl, 1961: 136-144).

There are four films which include the flagellants: *Häxan*, *The Seventh Seal*, *Black Death* and *Season of the Witch* (see infra 6.1), not coincidentally the four films that make the strongest case for fear-crazed and disintegrating society. In *Häxan*, for example, they were explicitly labelled as a clear expression of the 'barbarism' of the time (Aberth, 2003: 240; Harty, 1999: 119). In *The Seventh Seal*, the low-angled camera to 'suggest the terror that these wretches inspire in the onlookers; but when they have been harangued by a monk and stumble on their way again, the high camera set-ups reduce them to insignificance' (Cowie, 1975: 109). These flagellants also appear in *Black Death* and *Season of the Witch*, not coincidentally two films that are inspired by *The Seventh Seal*. None of these films contextualises this movement and in fact they all remain quite distanced from it. The flagellants seem merely used in order to give an extra feeling of estrangement to the viewer to look at the primitive, violent and extreme religious expression.

A pest doctor as the Grim Reaper in *Black Death*

Although there are famous examples of medieval pest doctors who fought against the plague, of which Guy de Chauliac is the most famous, they play no real part in the plague world as constructed in the cinema. There are only two films, *Black Death* and *Season of the Witch*, that include plague doctors although they are of no real importance to the story. In both films the doctors are represented in a long dark coat, wearing a mask with a long beak making them unrecognisable. By dehumanising the character of the plague doctor and only placing him in context of the suffering and the dying he comes to stand for Death himself. These formal features of a plague doctor seem to be based on Paul Fürst's engraving *Der Doctor Schnabel von Röm* (1656). This image, although it originally was meant as a caricature, is often (mis-)read as 'the concept of the plague as bringing death' (Ligon, 2006: 163). Historically, plague doctors did not look as

shown in the films. The long coat and the beak were only invented in 1619 by Charles de l'Orme, Louis XIII's personal physician. The long coat was made from Moroccan leather and the birdlike beak attached to the mask was filled with aromatics, as befitting the miasmatic theory of corrupted air – although it has been demonstrated that these aromatics indeed repelled the fleas (Boeckl, 2000: 15). Before, doctors just had a sponge before the nose against the smell or to protect them from infection as can be seen on a Venetian woodcut from 1493 in Joannes de Ketham's *Fasciculus Medicinae* (Zietz and Dunkelberg, 2004: 168-170; Crawfurd, 1914: 200-201). Only from the seventeenth century onwards these garments were commonly worn by plague doctors. However, there was in fact nothing threatening to these clothes until the caricature of Paul Fürst added an element of threat into his engraving. Since then the character of the plague doctor has mostly been used in a context of (near-)death and can even be seen as a surrogate for the Grim Reaper himself. When seen on the screen the function of the plague doctor seems to increase recognisability and enhance the fear and grim atmosphere. In *Black Death*, for example, a plague doctor as the grim reaper is shown when the dead are being carried out of the abbey. Instead of being connected with ideas of medicine or care, the plague doctor is represented in a context of death.[91]

In conclusion, although these visual elements reinforce the grim atmosphere and, dependent on the genre, may try to shock the viewer, it would seem that their meaning is mostly to be found in function of the narrative. Especially the function of the buboes is to trigger the meaning of the plague, regardless of the specific shape in which they are represented. The flagellants and the plague doctors have no real other function than to contribute to a grim and threatening atmosphere to the film.

[91] 'During the Bubonic Plague, doctors wore these bird-like masks to avoid becoming sick. They would fill the beaks with spices and rose petals, so they wouldn't have to smell the rotting bodies. A theory during the Bubonic Plague was that the plague was caused by evil spirits. To scare the spirits away, the masks were intentionally designed to be creepy'. Twitter 11 January 2014 @HistoryInPics with 1.31 million followers at the moment of the tweet.

5.2 The Dark Ages Imaginary

In this section we return to the issue of the Dark Ages imaginary. So far, most emphasis has been laid upon the Dark Ages imaginary as a *narrative*. In the first chapter the Dark Ages were described according to a narrative that divided society into a feudal divide between an oppressing elite and the oppressed people. It told either the story of how the people had learned to cope with the feudal oppression, or how the people in the end revolted against their lord and ended the feudal age. In the second chapter on the dogmatic Dark Ages the importance of a critical, rational mindset as the antidote for religious and dogmatic fanaticism, misogyny and intolerance was emphasised. Especially the role of education as the answer to counter the intellectual darkness in society was considered to be most essential. In this context the witch served as a symbol for an innocent victim of a misogynist, intolerant and persecuting Church (rationalist tradition) or as the symbol for the origin of (medical) science as a result of the misogynistic, anti-nature and artificial worldviews of the Church (romantic tradition). In the section on the Black Death, the plague was either used as a signifier for a social plague or the plague was inscribed in a Hegelian philosophy of history where it was the Black Death that ended the Dark Ages. This narrative was told as a secular equivalent of the Myth of the Great Flood. Only in case of witchcraft (the romantic and the rationalist witch) and the Black Death (buboes, flagellants and plague doctors) a specific iconography was described. These visual cues served as a means to evoke the appropriate meaning (of 'rationalist witch', 'romantic witch' or simply 'the plague') or were aimed at establishing an appropriate atmosphere (e.g. a witch burning at the stake, a procession of flagellants or the pest doctor as a Grim Reaper).

In this section we will focus on the general construction of the Dark Ages world with special attention for its (audio)visual aspects or in other words *how* the Dark Ages are *shown* to the audience. The central question will be if there is a specific iconography or visual style that is inherently linked to the narrative schemes as described above. Is there a single style of representing the Middle Ages as a Dark Age, or is there, as Salih (2009: 22) argued on medieval films in general, only a 'variety of looks'? What, if any, are the 'iconogrammes' or the 'passages obligées' (see De la Bretèque, 2004: 21 & 35) in these films that signify the medieval as the Dark Ages?

5.2.1 'Insistent filth and squalor…'

> Il était d'ailleurs bien inutile, pour expliquer l'origine de la lèpre au moyen âge, d'invoquer les croisades, quand on pouvait alléguer une cause bien plus directe et plus permanente; je veux dire: l'horrible saleté de cette époque. Et c'est à quoi Michelet, lui du moins, n'a pas manqué: la lèpre, à l'en croire, venait de ce que le moyen âge ne se lavait pas: *pas de bain pendant mille ans*! (excepté, sans doute, les bains de sang chaud!).
>
> G. Kurth, *Qu'est-ce que le Moyen Age?*, 18--, p. 13.

As the short quote from Kurth indicates, the Dark Ages are easily considered to be a primitive, filthy and disease-ridden era as nobody ever took a bath during a thousand years, implicitly until the coming of the Renaissance. Unless, of course, one considered the feudal lords who warmed their feet after a cold hunt inside the warm bodies of their serfs (see supra, 3.1.1, p. 82). The Dark Ages, in other words, are a primitive and violent filth-and-disease-ridden world. It is to be expected that these elements are easily transferrable to the screen. Vivian Sobchack (1997: 9-10), for example, considered the 'insistent dirt and squalor' to be the 'general and generalizing image' to 'signify and fix the 'real Middle Ages''. Comparable to the 'insistent fringe' that Barthes described as a label of 'Roman-ness', the filth, squalor or the lack of hygiene can be seen as an 'iconogramme' that instantly signifies the medieval as a Dark Age (see also Woods, 2014: 5-7; Pugh and Ramey, 2007: 5; Finke and Shichtman, 2007: 110; Lindley, 2001: 96). Additionally, also Collin McArthur emphasised similar elements when he described what he called 'cinematic Dark Ageism':

> Certainty about how to represent the past recedes the further back you go. The convention is that late Victorians are stiff and hypocritical at home and languidly supercilious in their imperial setting; Regency figures (and possibly early Victorians) are jolly and Dickensian; and eighteenth century figures are sexually rumbustious. Prior to that, however, things begin to mist over and certain 'Dark Ages' tropes predominate: darkness; religion and/or mysticism; grinding poverty and filth; physical deformity and disfiguring disease; and above all, unrestrained and unspeakable cruelty. (McArthur, 1998: 172)

However, this argument by McArthur is quite reminiscent of Arthur Lindley's (1998, see supra, 1.2.2) claim that before the break of the Renaissance, 'you're in the land of archetypes, […] dreamland'. In fact, McArthur already hints at the difference between 'realism' and 'hyperrealism' and the imaginary, which we will discuss in the next paragraph.

a) … as an expression of (hyper-)realism

Not surprisingly, images of filth, disease and violence are abundant in films on the Dark Ages. It is the age in which people were living with huge ulcers on their legs, like the soldier in *Anazapta* who was so used to it he gave it the name 'sir Perceval', or when people were living with strong physical deformities like the hunchback Salvatore in *The Name of the Rose* illustrates (Janssens, 1990: 131; Kemply, 1986). A critic (Canby, 1986) wrote that the monks in *The Name of the Rose* 'assumed picturesque attitudes' rather than being 'characters'. Also in *The Seventh Seal*, the extras were recruited from a geriatric home based upon their 'interesting faces' (Gado, 1984: 194). The lack of hygiene is also reflected in the rotten teeth, as is clear from *The Name of the Rose* or *Anazapta*. It is the age in which all kinds of deforming diseases are common occurrences, as for example the disfigured Arn when he is brought to the abbey of Fulda in *Pope Joan*, or the gruesome victims of the plague, as can be seen in *Black Death* and *Anazapta*. It is the time when people lived in the most dire and deprived conditions together with their animals, as Adso witnesses in *The Name of the Rose* how a chicken defecates on an old woman's face and how the household only responds with laughter. Also the music adds to a grim atmosphere with, for example, the dark and threatening arrangements in *Black Death*, the dissonant church bells in *The Name of the Rose* or the sound of a passing bell at the beginning of *The Advocate.* Additionally, there is an over-representation of snow, rain and mud that makes everything filthy, as illustrated in *Anazapta*, *The Name of the Rose* or *La Passion Béatrice*. These primitive conditions are also reflected in the superstition of the people and their inclination to use violence as a solution. From the slightest suspicion that the soldiers returning from the war in *Anazapta* might have been responsible for bringing the plague to the village, the villagers immediately lynch the soldier with 'Sir Perceval' on his leg.

This constant emphasising of filth, deformity and primitiveness is often used as an authenticity-strategy in order to create a more 'realist' look. As Sobchack (1997: 9, italics mine) continued her argument on the insistent filth and squalor, the 'muck and dirt and rushes on the floor', the 'graphic depictions of squalor', the 'dirt on their hands', the 'mud, dirt, rain', 'overwhelms the participants in H[istory]-films what apparently does count as *historical 'evidence"*. Both from the side of the filmmaker as the critic, filth and deformity are part of what makes the film 'real'. Jean-Jacques Annaud (in Taussat, 2001a: 271, italics mine; see also Salih, 2009: 28), for example, remarked on the rotten dentistry in *The Name of the Rose* that 'n'oublions pas que si, aujourd'hui, les dents sur pivot n'existaient pas, peu de gens auraient une dentition convenable. Ces visages de moines n'ont rien de monstrueux. Ils sont *vrais'*. Also the scenery in *La Passion Béatrice*, characterised by a desolate, windswept and often muddy landscape was considered to be 'profondément authentique' by production

designer Guy-Claude François (in Chandès, 2001: 271). Also the critics considered this kind of elements to be signs of realism. *Häxan*, for example, was described as attesting a 'morbid realism' by a reviewer of *Variety* (1923). The 'squalid conditions of the time' in *The Reckoning* offered Nusair (2004) a look that 'feels authentic; the gritty and dirty atmosphere seems to be an accurate representation of how things would've been back then'. Also Roger Ebert (2004, italics mine) wrote on *The Reckoning* that it was 'refreshing to enter the rude poverty of the *real* Middle Ages, where both the peasant and his lord lived with death and disease all around, and trusted sorcery and superstition to see them through'. Especially *Anazapta* was praised by the critics for its 'ultra-realism' (Elley, 2004) or its 'wonderfully credible period feel' for which it had to thank production designer Keith Maxwell for his 'shit covered production design' which melded 'admirably with [the] dreary oppressive cinematography by Alastair Meux' (Simpson, 2012: 83).

However, as a critic (M.B., *European Film Review.co.uk*, s.d., italics mine) wrote on *Anazapta*, the film had 'just about everything you'd *expect* from its medieval milieu: self flagellating priests, falcons eating eyeballs, pug-ugly supporting characters, witch (or wizard) dunking and maidens in chastity belts'.[92] In other words, what is meant by 'realism' is not as much referring to a former historical reality, than it is a construct of how we now *believe* that the medieval period looked like.

This refers to Lindley's concept of a 'dreamland' or McArthur's remark on the 'mist' that covers the medieval. As Sorlin (1980: 20) wrote: 'as the lesser known periods, or periods that do not belong to the common heritage of its presumed audience, have to stress the historical nature of the events more clearly'. This is done in case of medievalist films by referring to a series of signs that throughout history have come to stand for the 'medieval', which De la Bretèque called the medieval imaginary (see supra, 1.1.3c). The filth and squalor is not only used to refer to the historical conditions, but is a part of an imaginary aimed at creating a recognisable, understandable and believable construct of the medieval as the Dark Ages. Filmmakers will easily include all kinds of these signs, thereby creating a 'hyper-real' Dark Ages world. In fact, from this perspective it is often not even important whether or not a prop fits the age the film is set in, as long as it effectively produces what can be called the period-illusion or a period-effect (see supra, 1.1.1a , p. 11), the third clause in the 'Law against Anachronism' in Tashiro, 2004: 40-44). As long as it fits in the people's concept of the medieval, it can be used without damaging the perceived realism of the film. In *Black Death*, for example, the soldiers carry a 'heresy cage' with them in which the necromancer, once he was caught, was to be imprisoned in and

[92] *Anazapta* is, as Simpson (2012: 83) wrote, 'curiously devoid of animals', as also animals are frequently used as a signifier for the Dark Ages. However, when the film was shot in Wales in 2001, the country-side was struck with an outburst of foot-and-mouth which drastically restricted the possibility of using animals in the film.

tortured with. The fact that this cage was by far not an accurate period prop did not stop director Christopher Smith from using it in the film. Something this gruesome fitted perfectly in the medieval *feel*:

> Heresy cages were certainly around. But we didn't want the film to become so tied to absolute period accuracy that you can't have some fun. We just said, 'Okay, let's come up with a device and imagine that it's the latest, top-of-the-range stuff'. The one thing we have is this upward guillotine which just automatically feels humorous but is not accurate – I think the guillotine was a 17th or 18th century thing – but the idea of something with a blade going up between your legs, that's very medieval. (Smith, in Collis, 2011).

b) … as the expression of an implicit narrative

The signs which are linked to the concept of the Dark Ages are no neutral choices. In this paragraph we emphasise that these are more than merely signs 'operating in the open' as Sobchack (1997: 9) wrote, or only used to signify 'the Dark Ages'. More than only *referring* to the Dark Ages, these signs also implicitly *judge* the Dark Ages. Following the medievalist tradition, these signs that evoke the meaning of the Dark Ages are at the same time implicitly comparing that medieval world with modernity. The rotten teeth, for example, are no neutral signs, but implicitly refer to an age where people had no notice of personal hygiene nor the science, or more specifically the dentistry, to do something about it. When Bildhauer, for example, argued that the medieval was a communal time (see supra, 3.3. pp. 113-114) when the modern individual was not yet born, she (2011: 12 & 151-152) also argued that during the medieval the distinction between humans, animals or objects was blurred 'as there was no such thing as the modern or the Enlightenment subject' and 'the distinction between human subjects and animate and inanimate objects was not yet stable'. Contrary to the Renaissancistic or Classical ideal of the contained body, medieval bodies are more prone to excess of food, sex and filth as 'such carnivalesque bodies make humans more animal-like and show the individual human to be not clearly demarcated from what surrounds her, as she is constantly exchanging fluids and matter with the outside world through eating, drinking, fornicating and defecating'. Similarly, we argue that the different signs related to the insistent filth and squalor are the expression of an underlying narrative, inherently connected with the grand narrative of progress (or more specifically to Norbert Elias' theory of the civilising process).

Take, for example, the climatology in these films to be a 'sign' of the Dark Ages. Compared with, for example, the classical Hollywood films on the Middle Ages in the fifties and sixties (e.g. *Knights of the Round Table*, *Ivanhoe*, …), there is a disproportionate amount of snow, clouds and rain in films on the Dark Ages. In *The*

Name of the Rose, for example, the Dark Ages can be taken quite literally, as during the shoot of the film, on a set a few kilometres north of Rome, the clear blue sky above the set was darkened by six jeeps circling the set, equipped with smoke machines to blacken the sky. This fitted more with the idea of Annaud (in the audio commentary track to the DVD; see also Haydock, 2008: 31) of how the medieval world in the film should look like. Most other films on the Dark Ages also manifestly lack bright and merry colours, preferring brown, grey and black tones as a way to emphasise the dreary and gloomy character of the period. In *Black Death*, cinematographer Sebastian Edschmid desaturated the colours on the screen, resulting in a more cold and 'grainy' or 'gritty' look. In *The Seventh Seal*, Bergman considered that returning to a black and white format was more in line with the equally dark medieval world of the film. Also the landscape in *The Seventh Seal* has been described as a 'ghostlike instrument; it emerges as a reflection of a state of mind, as a metaphor of the self. The desolate landscape in the opening scenes of the film is an image of the isolation and despair of the knight' (Steene, 1975b: 99). Gunnar Fischer, the cinematographer of *The Seventh Seal*, made use of highly contrasting lightning in the dark scenes in which Block and Death stood central, and the subtly overexposed lightning in scenes involving the travelling artists (Stubbs, 1975: 62-63; Donner, 1975: 157; Höök, 1975: 20-21). Also in *La Passion Béatrice* the desolate landscape and the expressive lightning was used as a reflection of the grim world in which the De Cortemare's lived (Vigo, 1987: 4). As an admirer of the cinema of John Ford and his westerns, landscapes traditionally play an important role in Tavernier's films (Chevrier, 2011: 29; Hay, 2000: 6; Hay, 2000: 30-31; Greene, 1991: 991):

> J'attache une grande importance à la puissance émotionnelle du décor, à l'enracinement des personnages dans ce décor, à leurs rapports avec le décor. Il ne s'agit pas de naturalisme, je ne fais pas du néo-réalisme. Il s'agit du décor utilisé comme élément moteur dramatique, poétique. Comment il s'accorde avec l'état d'esprit, avec la démarche des personnages. Comment la caméra soude le personnage au décor. Voilà pourquoi j'aime particulièrement réaliser des films historiques. Voilà pourquoi j'attache une importance primordiale aux repérages. (Tavernier in Laurendeau, 1989: 44)

As the world of François de Cortemare is rough and uncompromising, so is nature surrounding him. The screen is filled with huge, but almost empty landscapes with nothing more than an occasional tree, bush and rock which emphasise the loneliness, isolation and desolation of medieval life (Hay, 2000: 123). Additionally, many scenes in films on the Dark Ages are set during the night, often lit with only torches, which again accentuates the darkness and threatening feel of the period.

Although it is certainly true that, as there was no gas or electric lightning during the Middle Ages, this overemphasising of the darkness of the period is not a neutral choice. As Umberto Eco wrote:

> To this day, many people, victims of the conventional 'Dark Age' image, think of the Medieval period as a somber epoch, even as far as color was concerned. When evening fell, in those days, people lived in poorly lit surroundings: in huts illuminated – at best – by the fire in the hearth; in enormous castle chambers lit by torches; or in monastery cells lit by the feeble light of a lantern, while the streets of the villages and cities were dark, as well as treacherous. But these were also characteristics of the Renaissance, of the Baroque age, and of successive periods that extend to the discovery of electricity. Medieval people, however, saw themselves (or at least portrayed themselves in poetry and painting) as living in extremely bright surroundings. (Eco, 2004: 99)

It seems that this reasoning can also be applied to the cinematic use of seasons. Winter, for example, is a frequently represented season in films on the Dark Ages (see *The Name of the Rose*, *La Passion Béatrice*, *The Reckoning* and *Pope Joan*). And while it is reasonable to presume that winter is coming once every year, this is not necessarily a neutral choice. The way winter is represented in films on the Dark Ages is by emphasising the impact winter had on its population and how it made daily life hard. As the narrator at the beginning of *Pope Joan* tells, medieval people did not think much of the political or military situation of the nation, as they 'had enough difficulty just surviving the winter'. Implicitly, this distances the medieval from the modern as winter is no longer a concern for (most of) us. The same holds true for something as trivial as rain. Where rain in contemporary society has become mostly an inconvenience, in medieval times it not only makes things dirty, but it could also ravage the crops, resulting in famine, as can be seen in *Anazapta*. Additionally, rain also turns the medieval roads into mud and makes travelling, as such a dangerous undertaking as the murdered messenger in the woods in *Pope Joan* illustrates, an extra hard operation. Even without rain, medieval roads are no modern highways, as Woods (2014: 5) tells how Courtois travels to Ponthieu in a cart where 'watching it we can practically feel the bumps ourselves'. In *The Reckoning*, for example, travelling means enduring cold, hunger and mechanical problems and facing obstacles on the road such as broken bridges that force the travellers to make a detour. These in fact banal elements such as snow, rain or the landscape itself can nonetheless offer the impression of the medieval as a time during which the people fought an never-ending battle against the elements which attests to the hardship of medieval life.

The same could be said about the continuous presence of animals in films on the Dark Ages. In every household, be it in the room where Joan's mother gives birth to Johanna in *Pope Joan*, the house of the nameless girl in *The Name of the Rose* or the inn in *The Seventh Seal*, animals are omnipresent. It seems to implicitly refer to a stage in history when man and animal, as Bildhauer's argument goes, were still more close to each other. This reasoning is taken to its limits in *The Advocate*, where the boundaries between animals and humans are constantly blurred. It is a world where donkeys get pardoned on the gibbet while the man is left to hang. Or a world where dogs smile at Courtois and where rats and pigs can witness in court, which *de facto* means that rats and pigs have more legal rights than Jews. Animals traditionally play

an important role in the literary genre of the fabliaux, the genre that inspired the film. In these fabliaux, animals are mostly used as they were used in fables: to show 'la bête humaine' (Levy, 1994: 73). In the film, however, they are used as a symbol for the absurdity in the medieval judiciary. In conclusion, while it probably is true that the roads were dirty and unsafe during the Middle Ages, or that dentistry and other forms of modern personal hygiene were not yet practised nor invented, these are no exclusive features of the Middle Ages. Still, it are the Middle Ages on which these elements signifying backwardness and primitiveness are commonly and repeatedly projected on.

The same selective interest can be discerned in the (kind of) stories that are told in a Dark Ages world. Where there is no denying of the historical evidence on the existence (as there is less consensus on the guilt) of Gilles de Rais as a mass child-rapist-and-murderer, by repeatedly constructing a similar character in the cinema (*La Passion Béatrice*, *The Reckoning* and *The Advocate*) this could create the illusion that this – also to historical medieval standards – aberration is representative for the period as a whole. Similarly, it is not because films dealing with the issue of witchcraft base themselves on an authentic fifteenth-century source such as the *Malleus Maleficarum*, that an authentic perspective representative for (at least a large part) of the people from the fifteenth century can be presented (see Roper, 2005: 11 & 125-126). The same holds true for Etienne de Bourbon's story on the holy greyhound, where the confrontation between a village and an inquisitor, which nearly ended in the burning of a woman as a witch, is told as if this was representative for the thirteenth century. As Benson (1999: 62) pointed out, the fact that the historical Etienne de Bourbon chose to write this story down was just because it was for De Bourbon an exceptional story as well. Finally, although the opening scene of *The Advocate*, where a donkey is acquitted while the man is still left to hang, did occur in the village of Vanvres in *1750*, it is used in the film to characterise the *Middle Ages* as a dark age in general. Just before this scene was shown, a text informed the audience of the existence of animal trials as follows: 'France - 15th century, the dark ages […] Animals were subject to the same civil laws as human beings. They could be prosecuted for crimes, and tried in a court of law. Unbelievable as it may seem, all cases shown in this film are based on historical fact.' However, Evans (1987: 151, see supra, 3.2.4a, p. 101), in whose book Megahey found this story, explicitly wrote that what happened in Vanvres in 1750 was 'unique in the annals of criminal prosecutions'.

Next we discuss the influence of other constructs of the medieval on the Dark Ages imaginary. More than only constructing the Dark Ages based upon the 'insistent filth and squalor', in some cases these Dark Ages are in fact a reaction against other, romanticised constructs of the Middle Ages. In other words, the perceived 'reality' of

the Dark Ages has nothing to do with historical realism, but is in fact a reaction against other constructs of the medieval.

5.2.2 From the 'Age of Chivalry' to the 'Calamitous 14th Century'

> The interest of the period itself – a violent, tormented, bewildered, suffering and disintegrating age, a time, as many thought, of Satan triumphant – was compelling and, as it seemed to me, consoling in a period of similar disarray. If our last decade or two of collapsing assumptions has been a period of unusual discomfort, it is reassuring to know that the human species has lived through worse before.
>
> B. Tuchman, *A Distant Mirror. The Calamitous 14th Century*, 1978, p. xiii.

The fourteenth century plays an important role in the construction of the Middle Ages as the Dark Ages in the cinema. It was a century characterised by the cumulative effects of famines, climate change, the Avignon Papacy followed by the Western Schism, the Black Death, several peasants revolts, economical crises, the Hundred Year's war and so on. Not coincidentally, the fourteenth century has been called the 'calamitous' fourteenth century, as made famous by Barbara Tuchman. Despite the (often fiercely) contested scholarship (see e.g. Bachrach, 1979: 724-725; Wood, 1979: 433-435), Tuchman's book *A Distant Mirror: The Calamitous Fourteenth Century* (1978) was a huge commercial success amongst the broader public, for whom the book in fact was mostly designed. One of the more notable features of this book was the parallel which she drew between the fourteenth century as a world in decline, and the twentieth century, equally characterised by disease, wars and a general sense of decline, hence the title 'a distant mirror' (Cantor, 1991: 17-19; Spitz, 1980: 135; Jemison, 1980: 81). For this, her work has been compared with the other seminal work that represented the late-medieval period as a world in decline and transition: Johan Huizinga's *Herfsttij der Middeleeuwen* (Spitz, 1980: 136).

There are at least three aspects of the fourteenth century that fit well with the Dark Ages imaginary. First, following Tuchman (e.g. 1978: xiii-xiv), the fourteenth century serves as a distant mirror for the madness in contemporary society. The assumption that human nature does not change, which consequently means that we can compare ourselves directly with our medieval ancestors, may be a debatable assumption from a historical perspective, but it certainly fits the medievalist tradition of judging the medieval from our perspective of modernity. Second, as it is darkest just before the dawn, the fourteenth century can be seen as the *nec plus ultra* of medieval darkness just before the first glimpses of light from modernity. Especially

the role of the Hundred Year's War (see infra, 5.2.2b, *Black Death*, *The Pied Piper*, *La Passion Béatrice* and *Anazapta*) and the outburst of the plague (see supra, 5.1), *Anazapta*, *The Pied Piper*, *the Advocate*, *The Seventh Seal*, *The Reckoning* and *Black Death*) still capture our modern imagination. In other words, the fourteenth century not only offers the 'worst' that the medieval has to offer, but in the end it can still present the first glimpses of hope for a better age. The fourteenth century is not only a calamitous, but also a pivotal age, a transitional period from the medieval to modernity.

Third, in this section we argue that the construct of the fourteenth century in films on the Dark Ages is not only based upon the historical occurrences of the century itself, but also that it, at least partly, serves as the opposing image or the antitype to the 'Age of Chivalry'. In other words, in some cases the construct of the fourteenth century is not only based upon a construct of that era itself, but is constructed as a reaction or answer to other and romanticised constructs of the medieval. This ambivalence, to the point of schizophrenia, in representing the Middle Ages is not new (see supra, 1.3.1). The crusades and the related ideas on knighthood can be seen as an example of this. The crusades have long been one of the 'great myths of medieval history, an epic of bravery and daring, and international movement of knights, putting into glorious practice the ideals of the new chivalry' (Richards, 1977: 73). In the context of the Enlightenment, however, David Hume wrote on the crusades in his *History of Great Britain* (1761) that they were 'the most signal and durable moment of human folly that has yet appeared in any age or nation'. In 1790, not even thirty years later, Edmund Burke looked nostalgically back on the medieval period and the idea of knighthood. In a conservative reaction on the French Revolution he wrote in his *Reflections on the Revolution in France*: 'Little did I dream that I should have lived to see disasters fallen upon her in a nation of gallant men, in a nation of men of honour, and cavaliers. […] The age of chivalry is gone […] and the glory of Europe is extinguished forever' (in Girouard, 1981: 19). Another example is Reynald De Châtillon (1125-1187), an influential knight in the period between the second and third crusade (see Aube, 2007; Maalouf, 1984: 205-207; Runciman, 1968: 436-437). The French conservative historian Gustave Schlumberger (1844-1919) wrote that De Châtillon was 'un des plus audacieux, un des plus extraordinaires guerriers de la Croisade, un de ces hommes de fer du douzième siècle oriental, dont la destine fut peut-être la plus fantastique, qui eussent figure au rang des demi-dieux s'ils eussent vécu dans l'antiquité' (Schlumberger, 1898: 2 & 250). In 2005, however, in *Kingdom of Heaven* by Ridley Scott, De Châtillon had become a brutal, drunk, bloodthirsty and warlike madman who was almost personally responsible for the fall of Jerusalem in 1187 (see also Lindley, 2007: 19 & 23). In other words, depending on the context and perspective taken towards the medieval, an identical historical object

can be represented in a totally different way. For films on the Dark Ages as well, debunking such constructions was one of the main intentions.

a) Misleading Expectations: The Advocate *and* La Passion Béatrice

Two films, *The Advocate* and *La Passion Béatrice,* explicitly constructed a medieval world as a reaction against a nostalgic construct of the medieval. In *The Advocate*, Parisian city lawyer Richard Courtois, sick of the politicking and corruption of the city (modernity) is hoping to find peace of mind in the small countryside village of Abbeville where he expects to live amongst the 'real' and 'good' people. The origins of Courtois' great expectations are immediately revealed at the beginning of the film. In the local inn, he does not want the usual sausage and stew, but orders his food by quoting an extract from the poem *Le Dit de Franc Gontier*, written by Phillippe de Vitry (1291-1361), a poet and bishop of Meaux.

Le Dit de Franc Gontier

Soubz feuille vert, sur herbe delitable
Lez ru bruiant et prez clere fontaine
Trouveay fiche une borde portable,
Ilec mengeoit Gontier o dame Helayne
Fromage frais, lacit, burre fromaigee,
Craime, matton, pomme, nois, prune, poire,
Aulx et oignons, escaillonge froyee
Sur crouste bise, au gross el, pour mieulx boire.

The Advocate

Under green leaves,
besides a noisy brook
the peasant Gontier took his meal
on fresh cheese, apple and plum
chopped shallots,
on a crust of good bread with course salt,
the better to drink.

This poem by De Vitry was one of the classical examples that expressed the ideal of the simple life, where one could enjoy life in all modesty, health, honest love and marriage, safety and independence. This medieval idyllic and pastoral literary tradition, with roots in Antiquity, was aimed against the artificial and dishonest court life (Huizinga, 1999: 133-134). These ideas completely resonate with Courtois' intentions in the film to find the real life in the countryside, which he could not find in Paris. *The Advocate*, however, completely debunks this ideal as a chimera. In fact, Courtois is constructed as a Don Quixote who was also misled by reading too much

idealised medieval literature. The simple 'peasant quarrels' Courtois thinks will be the main part of his job as a country lawyer, 'a meter here or there of a boundary, a grandfather's right of pasture', soon proves to be cases of cuckoldry and murder, but more significantly also animal- and witch trials. Instead of the calm and idealised world as described by De Vitry, Courtois enters a violent, irrational world ruled by fear. Near the end of the film, he realises that, despite his expectations, he does not belong there: 'I thought it would be simple and peaceful, but it's full of fear, this place'. And although he adapts in court by learning to play the game (see supra, 3.2.4b, pp. 105-106), he refuses to let his ideals of justice go in favour of the ideal of order for the local lord. Shortly thereafter, he returns to the city which he now calls 'really the only place to make a living'. Where the film starts as a critique on modernity as a time of politics and corruption, *The Advocate* demonstrates that the nostalgic reaction of creating a better world in the past is not the answer. Despite its flaws, modernity is still the best of all possible worlds.

A similar construct is visible in *La Passion Béatrice*, which was aimed against the idealised, bright and merry medieval world of Hollywood in the fifties and sixties. In this film Tavernier wanted to 'shatter the conventionally romanticised Hollywood portrayal of the 'age of chivalry' with its mythical, over-lit images of shining knights, ladies, finery, castles and white horses' (Hay, 2000: 122). Typical of Tavernier's style of 'stripping history of its varnish' (Greene, 1991: 990), he constructed a world that is far removed from Hollywood's splendour. From this perspective the opening scene of *La Passion Béatrice* can be seen as intentionally misleadingly idyllic where it portrays a loving father saying goodbye to his family as he has to fulfil his duty to his King to go to war, with on the background the beautiful mountains of the Haute Vallée de l'Aude. When his son, François de Cortemare, asks his father if he can go with him, he receives his father's dagger instead. With that dagger, he makes his son responsible for protecting his mother while he is away as 'elle est si belle, et les hommes si brutaux'. However, shortly thereafter, the medieval world of *La Passion Béatrice* reveals its true colours when young François returns home and finds his mother in bed with another man. Without hesitation he kills his mother's lover with the dagger he just received from his father. He then coldly orders his mother to get rid of the body and adds: 'Mon père n'a pas été vengé car vous ne l'avez point trompez'.

The same contrast between an idealised construct and the brutal reality is demonstrated in the film when François de Cortemare returns home from captivity during the war. While his household is more than eager to hear all about his 'faits'd'armes', they are greatly disappointed when François de Cortemare tells his side of the story on the war. At first, he does not even want to tell the story and significantly adds that somebody else, someone *who wasn't there*, should tell the story as that person would tell it more beautifully than it actually was ('Demande à des écorcheurs qui n'étaient pas des nôtres. Ils inventeront l'histoire, elle n'en sera que

plus belle'). In the same vein, François de Cortemare mocks the priest by saying 'Qu'en serait-il de la Chrétienté sans l'imagination des apôtres?'. The story he tells indeed attests of little glory as he never even managed to hurt an Englishman and was captured due to the immense cowardice of his son Arnaud. There were no victories and no great stories to be told. Contrary to the romanticised image of the medieval, there is no honour, glory or splendour in the cold, brutal and barren world of the De Cortemare's.

Ironically, while both *The Advocate* and *La Passion Béatrice* are explicitly trying to debunk the myth of the ideal Middle Ages, it could be argued that they are replacing it with another construct: the Dark Ages. In the next section we will discuss one of the traditional cornerstones of the medieval imaginary, the knight, and how this construct essentially has been reversed.

b) Dark Ages Chivalry

> 'Chivalry! – why maiden, she is the nurse of pure and high affection – stay of the oppressed, the redresser of grievances, the curb of the power of the tyrant – Nobility were but an empty name without her, and liberty finds the best protection in her lance and her sword.'
>
> Ivanhoe to Rebecca, in Walter Scott, *Ivanhoe*, 1819 (1996), p. 316.

> The single most common characteristic of the swashbuckling hero was that he was a gentleman. Prince or pirate, bravo or bandit, he subscribed to the same code of behaviour, a code directly descended from the chivalric practices of the Middle Ages.
>
> J. Richards, *Swordsmen of the Screen*, 1977, p. 72.

The knight is without doubt one of the centrepieces of the medieval imaginary in general, which is reflected in the popularity of the character of the knight in medievalist films. Being a knight, the values he embodies, or earning knighthood are of the most positive, inspirational and appealing elements of a medieval cinematic world. Especially in the fifties and sixties in Hollywood, this kind of films were at their height. Landmark films like *Ivanhoe* (Thorpe 1952), *Knights of the Round Table* (Thorpe 1953), *Prince Valiant* (Hathaway 1954) or *El Cid* (Mann 1961), just to name a few, have become seminal and their influence in popularising a romanticised image of the medieval cannot be underestimated. These films attest the typical pomp and pageantry, the epic spectacles, the entertaining adventures and the daring deeds of the heroic knights, all set in a world of romance and bold lovers, tournaments, banquets and duels. Shortly put, these films epitomise the idealised 'Age of Chivalry' (see De la Bretèque, 1995: 50).

Traditionally, being a knight can be approached from three different, but not mutually exclusive, perspectives. First, there is the knight as a warrior, excelling in 'strength and physical courage, prowess in battle and skilled in the arts of war'. Second, the knight is also a 'true soldier of Christ' and is an example of 'chastity, austerity, humility and righteousness'. And third, there is the courtly ideal of the knight who sings 'songs of love and devotion' to his lady fair and is an 'adept at music and the dance, a witty conversationalist and an expert in the social graces' (Richardson, 1997: 72-74; see also Elliott, 2011: 53; Barthélemy, 2001: 214-228; Girouard, 1981: 16; Chateaubriand, 1906: 571).[93] Additionally, knights always function as loyal servants to God and the King, and as defenders of the women, widows and orphans. They are often of noble birth, gifted with exceptional skills and attest to an ideal where 'where whiteness, heterosexuality, youth, strength, and entitlement rule' (Driver and Ray, 2004: 9; see also Elliott, 2011: 60-61; Kelly and Pugh, 2009: 4 & 5; Higson, 2009: 203; Kelly, 2007; Aronstein, 2005: 12; Driver and Ray, 2004: 5 & 9; Kelly, 2004: 10; De la Bretèque, 1995: 49-78; Williams, 1990: 9).

In films on the Dark Ages, however, the knight and the idea of knighthood is by far not as important as they are in these abovementioned kind of films. The real heroes in the Dark Ages are the scientists, doctors, lawyers and artists rather than the brave and hard-bodied masculine knights. In most films, such as *The Name of the Rose*, *The Advocate*, *The Reckoning* or *Le moine et la sorcière* there even are no knights, only soldiers who merely function as guards. And although the protagonist of *The Seventh Seal* strictly speaking is a knight, he never acts as one. In *The Pied Piper*, *La Passion Béatrice*, *Anazapta* and *Black Death* there are knights, but the way they are constructed is almost exactly the reverse of what an ideal knight is supposed to be. Only in *Pope Joan* a more typical construct of a Knight is offered, which we will discuss at the end of this section. Not coincidentally, *The Pied Piper*, *La Passion Béatrice*, *Anazapta* and *Black Death* are all set in the fourteenth century in either the context of the Hundred Year's War, the plague, or both. *La Passion Béatrice*, for example, was explicitly set in 'le crépuscule de la chevalerie' and turned the 'Age of Chivalry' into 'une époque de violence' (Tavernier, in Groult, 1988: 34; see also Greene, 1991: 997). Historically, the fourteenth century was indeed an age of transition, or in fact an age of decline for the traditional idea of medieval knighthood. This is also one of the main threads in Tuchman's *A Distant Mirror: The Calamitous 14th Century*, in which she focussed on Enguerrand de Coucy VII as a representative for French fourteenth century chivalry:

> The choice is thus narrowed to a male member of the Second Estate – that is, of the nobility – and has fallen upon Enguerrand de Coucy VII, last of a great dynasty and "the

[93] Elliott (2011: 53) only makes a distinction between Knights, as Parsifal, and Warriors as for example Beowulf.

> most experienced and skilful of all the knights of France." His life from 1340 to 1397 coincided with the period that concerned me, and, from the death of his mother in the great plague to his own perfectly timed death in the culminating fiasco of the century, seemed designed for my purpose. (Tuchman, 1978: xiv-xv)

The story of Enguerrand's life ran parallel with the fate of chivalry in France, and his death 'symbolized the end of a dying world' (Spitz, 1980: 135). Where the mounted knight and especially the cavalry once had been the invincible spear point of medieval warfare, they had become more and more obsolete in the fourteenth century. Already in 1297 such an army had been defeated by common infantry during the battle of Stirling Bridge between the Scottish insurgents and the English army, and not much later a similar defeat occurred in the Battle of the Gulden Spurs in Kortrijk in 1302 between the Flemish insurgents and the French army. When during the Hundred's Year War the longbow was introduced, which devastating effect on the battlefield was demonstrated during the battle of Crecy (1356) and Agincourt (1415), the mounted knight once and for all lost his military significance. At the same time, it also meant the end the traditional idea of medieval knighthood.

In this section we will focus on how *The Pied Piper*, *La Passion Béatrice*, *Anazapta* and *Black Death* construct what essentially is an *anti*-knight. The literature usually focuses on the positive representations of knighthood, such as Elliott (2011: 70-80) described the 'swashbuckler knight', such as Erol Flynn in *The Adventures of Robin Hood*, 'the cowboy knight' and the 'all-action hero' as for example William Wallace in *Braveheart* or Robin Hood in *Robin Hood: Prince of Thieves*. In films on the Dark Ages however, almost all codes of chivalry have been reversed.

Knights in films on the Dark Ages are not to be compared with a typical Lancelot. Franz, the son of the Baron in *The Pied Piper*, is despite being a warlike soldier portrayed as a more effeminate character, spoiled by birth and inherited wealth. Similarly, in *La Passion Béatrice*, when François de Cortemare speaks of his comrades at arms, he does not address them as 'chévaliers' or knights, but calls them 'écorcheurs' which means 'spoilers' or 'flayers'. Historically, this refers to fifteenth century French mercenaries or unemployed soldiers after the war, with a very bad reputation of discipline and behaviour (Hardy, 2012: 358-359; Contamine, 2004: 265-267). In *Anazapta*, Sir Walter De Mellerby and his nephew are also not quite the knights in shining armour, but are in fact warlike, primitive and bloodthirsty men who are only good at fighting. They attest to one of the common stereotypes of medieval warfare, namely that between the fall of Rome and the coming of the state forces in the sixteenth century state no disciplined armies existed (McGlynn, 1993: 28). Medieval warfare, from this perspective, consisted out of brutal metal-plated men hitting each other as hard as possible with the largest and bluntest object possible. Also in *Black Death* the soldiers are no Knights of the Round Table, but just

as in *La Passion Béatrice* plain mercenaries. Ivo, for example, was captured during a campaign in France, but as he would not talk, they cut out his tongue. Mold is introduced as a man 'to leave alone, unless there is butchering to be done'. Dalywag is a 'torturer, a hangman, and if rumour is true murderer, thief, and defiler of women'. The only soldier with ideals and values is Ulric, the leader of the group. But where Ulric shares with Parsifal that they are both knights fighting for God, unlike Parsifal Ulric is a religious fanatic who uses his own plague-infested body as a biological weapon to wipe out a village of heretics.

Additionally, there is no glory to be found in these cinematic dark worlds. In *La Passion Béatrice*, for example, the heroic knight had been replaced with cowards who soil themselves at first sight of the enemy. Also in *Black Death*, there is no such thing as glory in fighting, as Smith told:

> Another thing we did was to make sure that every kill in the film is just cold and merciless, which is a reflection of those times. You usually see in most modern horror movies that everyone falls victim to their weaknesses, but with Black Death everyone is just brutalized. It's not their weaknesses that get them; it's just the cold reality of the situation they're in. (Christopher Smith in Wixson, 2011)

In the world of *The Pied Piper*, *La Passion Béatrice* and *Anazapta* there is also no glory as in all three films the lord gets captured by his enemies. During the Middle Ages it was common practice to keep the opponent alive, as a knight was more worth alive than he was dead (Bisson, 1994: 18; McGlynn, 1993: 30). However, this is not presented in films on the Dark Ages as a way to prevent bloodshed or to gain money, as it only results in loss. This implies that a large sum of money had to be paid to get them free (*La Passion Béatrice*), a burden which all too easily falls upon the shoulders of the common people (*The Pied Piper* and *Anazapta*). Additionally, no film offers a reason or explanation as to *why* they went fighting in the first place, which makes the loss of money even more pointless. Also, the chivalric code according to which a prisoner of war should be treated courteously according to his title, is badly violated in *Anazapta* where the prisoner of war is not only mistreated, but also tortured.

Romanticised films usually focus on military successes such as the Battle of the Gulden Spurs in 1302 in Kortrijk (*De Leeuw van Vlaanderen*, Claus 1984), the Battle of Stirling Bridge in 1297 (*Braveheart*, Gibson 1995) or the battle of Valencia in 1099 where Rodrigo Diaz de Vivar, better known as El Cid, even achieved victory in death (*El Cid*, Mann 1961). In the context of the Hundred Years' War, the English easily focus on Agincourt in 1415, made famous by Shakespeare's *Henry V* and its filmic adaptations, while the French can focus on Jeanne d'Arc. In films on the Dark Ages, however, the central battle is Crecy in 1346. And despite that this battle historically was a crushing victory for the English, quite similar to the battle of Agincourt in 1415, in all films on the Dark Ages the battle is presented from a perspective of loss.

As already mentioned above, in *La Passion Béatrice* François de Cortemare referred to a battle against the English where the French nobles ran over their own troops, crushing and killing them before being slain by the English. This is a historical reference to the battle of Crecy. According to a French chronicle, because the strings of their crossbows had become wet due to the rain, the Genoese crossbowmen of the French army could not reach their full potential. Impatiently, and attesting a lot of disdain for their archery, the French cavalry rode over their own troops in order to attack the English. During this attack, however, they were mercilessly shot down by the English longbows (Prestwich, 2005: 148). More remarkable, however, is that also in *Black Death* where the story is told from an English perspective, the battle is presented as something negative:

> Three summer past we fought a battle at Crecy in Normandy. King Edward's army was dwarfed. For every twenty of us there were a hundred Frenchmen, at least. And the French, ah the French, they could sense victory, they could smell it. For that day for the first time, our archers used the longbow, quicker to load, further in flight. Their arrows were useless, couldn't reach us. But ours, ours were like a dark buzzing cloud. [At] the days end the field was littered with their dead and their dying. A custom, no matter how fierce the battle, was to use the misericorde. […] On this day, there was an end to chivalry. King Edward ordered every Frenchman left alive to be killed without mercy. Arms, heads, legs hacked away. God's greatest army descended into savagery. […] We invited death among us that day. He hasn't left us since.

It is known that the historical battle itself was an exceptionally fierce battle and has been described by Prestwich (2005: 157) as 'not a gentlemanly fight, dominated by the conventions of chivalric culture. There was horrific carnage, and heaps of dead and dying men marked the killing ground of the battlefield.' Yet this is not what is being referred to as the importance of the decisive victory of the English on the French in 1346. Usually this battle is remembered as the introduction of the longbow to the European battlefields, although this is not completely true (see Bradbury, 1985: 71-115; see also Elliott, 2011: 57).[94] Similar to what Wolfstan tells there are contemporary accounts that describe the arrows as being 'like hail, and obscured by the sky; another says it was as if a snowstorm had obscured the sky, and a thick fog had come suddenly over the sun' (Bradfury, 1985: 106). It ended the idea of a fair man-to-man combat as the longbows and eventually gunpowder would gradually increase the range of fighting. The bow was not a noble weapon as knights were linked with swords, lances and their horses. The crossbow was even met with more disdain as it is an even more mechanical and cold way of fighting, which as De la Bretèque (2004: 836) argues could have played a role in why Willem Tell is not a

[94] The English had already used the longbow and new archery tactics in the wars against the Scottish (Bradbury, 1985: 91). Also the so-called novelty of the longbow is to be nuanced as what was new during the battle of Crecy was only the sheer increase of the number of archers rather than a different kind of bow (Prestwich, 2005: 148; Bradbury, 1985: 106).

popular figure.[95] However, as the military value of archers proved to be undeniable, the attitude towards archers shifted in a positive way – which in fact may have led to the positive appreciation of history's most known archer Robin Hood (Bradbury, 1985: 1-7).

Interestingly, Wolfstan also claims that after the battle of Crecy the English King Edward III ordered to kill all the prisoners which was completely against all the chivalric codes. While there is no mentioning of this in the historical chronicles on Crecy, a similar event did occur after the battle of Agincourt (1415). Just as Crecy, Agincourt was a crushing victory for the English for which the use of the longbow proved to be an important factor (Bradbury, 1985: 116). It was after this battle that Henry V ordered all prisoners to be killed, and not to be ransomed as per usual. This remains to this day a very controversial decision (Ambühl, 2007: 755; Bradfury, 1985: 135).[96] According to English sources the massacre at Agincourt was purely out of strategic and tactical reasons as Henry V was informed of an attack of the French rear-guard and feared that the prisoners might play a decisive role if that attack were to be successful. According to the French sources it was nothing more than a war crime. According to Wolfstan, God left the earth after the massacre of Crecy: 'That day they invited Death, and he has not left us since'. This story also links the calamitous events of the Hundred Year's war with the coming of the Plague, which would again result in the omnipresence of Death.

Finally, even from a fictionalised German perspective as in *The Pied Piper*, the battle of Crecy is presented as an aberration. Franz, who was captured after the battle, refers to how even children fought in the battle, and 'died as nobly as the next' (see supra, 3.2.1a, p. 85). In other words, from all perspectives, French, English and German, the battle of Crecy is referred to in a negative way.

Finally, in none of these four films the knight behaves in a courtly fashion. The treatment of women, for example, is far removed from the behaviour of Lancelot or Tristan, as in *Anazapta* Nicholas hits Lady Mathilda de Mellerby, Franz is completely indifferent to his bride to be, and the notorious treatment of women by François de Cortemare has been discussed in a previous chapter. Additionally, as films on the

[95] Take for example the duel in *King Arthur* (Fuqua 2004) during the final and climactic battle on Baden Hill between Lancelot and the son of the Saxon leader. Contrary to his father, the son no longer has the brute power or fighting skill, making all sorts of mistakes during the film. When he is confronted with Lancelot on the battlefield, he does not stand an honest chance. Therefore, he picks up a kind of crossbow and shoots a non-expecting Lancelot in the chest. This is no honorary win. Remarkably, Lancelot can continue the fight on equal terms, for he throws his sword and wounds the son of the leader. So, equally wounded, the fight continues and eventually Lancelot wins. Lancelot gets killed by a cowardly action, but his superiority is all the more proven over the son by a one on one combat.

[96] According to the French between 1400 and 2200 prisoners were killed, according to English sources there were only 700 to 800 casualties (Ambühl, 2007: 755-787).

Dark Ages lack a King, they also lack a royal court and courtly events such as banquet scenes, which De la Bretèque (2004: 35) considered to be a 'passage obligée' in medieval films. There are two examples (*Pope Joan* and *The Advocate*) where a banquet is held in films on the Dark Ages. These, however, are far removed from the typical banquet scene such as in *The Black Shield of Falworth* (Maté 1954). In *Pope Joan,* the banquet takes place at the court of the bishop in what seems to be more like a dark cellar, only lit by fiery torches. The bishop sits with a courtesan at his side and the evening's entertainment is a big bold man farting in a torch. In *The Advocate,* dinner is served on naked women and the scenery consists of scarcely clad peasants who are ordered to pose as a living statue. It is a spectacle of the wealth and decadence of the lord.

In *Anazapta*, another characteristic element of the chivalric world, the duel, is represented in a negative way. Traditionally, duels are inherently linked with the aristocracy and the idea of keeping one's honour (Shoemaker, 2002: 525; McCord Jr., 1999: 89-94), which is one of the central concepts in the chivalric world, as for example in *El Cid* (Mann 1961). In a romanticised context duels offered the possibility for knights to demonstrate their strength and military abilities or to settle their disputes in a fair and honourable way, as for example the fight between Ivanhoe and Sir Brian de Bois-Gilbert in *Ivanhoe* (Richards, 1977: 72; see also Jones, 2012: 390). *Anazapta* deconstructs this concept by offering a duel between Sir Walter De Mellerby and the count de Fougères during a campaign in the Hundred Year's War. This duel, however, is no gentlemen's occasion to let the two leaders fight in order to prevent more bloodshed, but as entertainment or in other words just another excuse to fight as the battle is gloriously described as 'swords […] slicing through the [French] bastards, blood spurting from their veins'. When Sir Walter is knocked down, probably by the count himself, we see how the count, contrary to the respect one should have for the opponent, spits on the ground as a clear way of disapproving Sir Walter. The same could be said about tournaments and jousting, comparable to the duel. According to De la Bretèque (1985: 20) the tournament was one of the most characteristic 'figures obligées' of medieval film.[97] However, they are completely absent in films on the Dark Ages. And although there was a tournament in *Morality Play*, the novel by Barry Unsworth (1995) on which *The Reckoning* was based, it was omitted in the film.[98]

[97] In *Jabberwocky* (Gilliam 1977), a satire on the Middle Ages but essentially following the narrative of the Dark Ages, a tournament is presented as a show to divert the people and is essentially nothing more than a hack-and-splash of knights killing each other. There is no glory, no splendour, no honour in it.

[98] This is not to say that the tournament in the novel is represented as a glorious and chivalric occasion. It is presented as past glory, when knights are no longer the centrepiece of the army and they are in fact, like the protagonists, players in a show (see Unsworth, 1995: 182).

One film is an exception to this reversing of the construct of the knight. The character of Gerald in *Pope Joan*, for example, is constructed as a typical perfect knight. It is he who stands up for Johanna during the banquet scene at the bishop's court in Fulda, falls in love with her and protects her for the rest of his life. When he becomes a captain in the army of Lothar, he shows himself to be a worthy warrior on the battlefield, but also a good commander who is concerned with the well-being of his soldiers (contrary to Lothar himself who is only interested in his personal gain). When Gerald first takes up his duty for his King and leaves for the war, Johanna waits for him at the gate to give him flowers as a way of saying goodbye. This scene in fact closely resembles the painting *A Knight farewelling his Lady* by Edmund Blair Leighton (1852-1922), which is a typical romanticised rendering of the medieval. Although we claim that *Pope Joan* essentially has to be read as a film on the Dark Ages, this does not prevent the film from including the archetype of the perfect knight.

5.2.3 Interpreting the Dark Ages Iconography

> It befell in the old days that Rome at need withdrew her legions from England. Then stood the realm in great darkness and danger, for every overlord held rule in his own tower and fought with fire and sword against his fellow. Then against this dark forces rose up a new force wherein flowered courtesy, humanity and noble chivalry.
>
> Introductory narration in *Knights of the Round Table*, Thorpe 1953.

Despite the existence of signs that refer to the Middle Ages as a Dark Age, in this section we will emphasise that the narrative remains the fundament on which the Dark Ages imaginary is based. Although signs such as the filth and squalor refer to the Dark Ages, as well as the rotten dentistry and the effects due to the hard climate implicitly evoke the grand narrative of progress, the context in which these signs are used remains of crucial importance. The signs which we have sketched out above are no exclusive features of films on the Dark Ages. The quote of the introductory narration of *Knights of the Round Table* above, for example, evokes a feudal world where 'every overlord held rule in his own tower and fought with fire and sword against his fellow' at which point the film shows images of a plundered and burnt village. However, this does not suffice to claim that this film is set during the Dark Ages, as the answer to this anomaly lies in glorifying the perfect stable and conservative society ruled by the King and his knights. While Mordred in the same film fights for causes a modern audience cannot identify with, comparable to the

'medieval' cause of Ulric in *Black Death* or the wars in *The Pied Piper, La Passion Béatrice* or *Anazapta* for which there is no reason given, this is contrasted in *Knights of the Round Table* in which the knights fight for a cause worth fighting for: returning peace and stability to the kingdom of Arthur.[99] In other words, the narrative structure in which these signs are used is highly important. Take for example the construct of the English society in *Braveheart*, led by a cruel and cold-hearted king and individual lords still claiming their *ius primae noctis*. However, this is no implicit plea for a democratic society emphasising individual and equal rights, but is meant to contrast with the harmonious and natural society of the Scots. The cold and dark castles of the English may look somewhat similar to the castle of François de Cortemare, but in *Braveheart* these are contrasted, again, with the beautiful, harmonious and natural villages of the Scots. Illustrative of the fact that filth and squalor is no prerogative of films on the Dark Ages is that the concept of 'cinematic Dark Ageism' by Colin McArthur earlier in this chapter (see supra, 5.2.1) was in fact written in an article that focussed on *Braveheart.* The narrative of the film, the tale of how a hard-bodied hero fought for the freedom of his people and the nation as a whole against a tyrannical usurper, is far removed from the Dark Ages in this study. Depending on how the signs signifying the medieval are read, or in other words dependent in what narrative they are inscribed, a whole different reading of these signs can be given.

Consider, for example, two different situations related to the overabundance of mud during the Middle Ages as depicted in *Braveheart* and *Anazapta*. In *Braveheart*, shortly after William Wallace's wife had been raped and killed by an English commander, the Scots plot their revenge. In a surprise raid, they wallow through the mud and the filth and kill the English commander. In *Anazapta*, Lady Mathilda de Mellerby has to put on a nice dress in order to try to sway the Bishop to grant her a delayed payment so she can wait for the ransom of the prisoner of war. This way, her lands do not go forfeit and become property of the Bishop. However, from the moment she leaves the house, her beautiful dress gets covered in mud due to the incessant rain. In the first example, it could be argued, the mud adds to the heroism of the scene. It makes it more rough, more brute, more *real* of how Wallace does not stop before he achieves his vengeance. Mathilda de Mellerby, on the other hand, is hindered and stained by the mud. It is seen as a sign of an inherently filthy age as mankind could not yet control or protect himself against the elements.

[99] Another example is *Joan of Arc* (Dugay 1999), which opens with cold snowy images contrasted with a fiery stake being lit, an agitated crowd being withheld by soldiers, emphasised by dramatic music. After this introduction, a text is projected: 'Once, in a time known as the Dark Ages there lived a legend whose coming had been foretold by the great prophet Merlin. It was said that after nearly a century of war this young maiden would unite her divided people and lead them to freedom. It did not say how.' This freedom, however, is against a military occupation of France by the English and to be obtained through heroism, religion and patriotism.

This also brings another element of interpretation related to the uncertain meaning inherent to the audiovisual image (see supra, 1.1.1.a, p. 10). Where some may see a heroic fight, others may see only violence. Again referring to the situation between William Wallace and the English commander: if William Wallace steps through the mud and brutally kills several British soldiers and cuts the throat of their commander in revenge for what he did to his wife, is this barbarity or heroic justice? This also has historical implications as what is considered to be 'extreme' in different contexts.

There is a general tendency in the cinema, as well as on television, to portray events in a more bloody and brutal way (e.g. Trilling, 2010: 64). The ironical and light-hearted character of James Bond now operates in a world 'pervaded by guilt, doubt, grief and foreboding' as can be seen in *Casino Royal* or *Skyfall*. Even the 'cheery' Batman (Martinson 1966) has, according to Cox (2012), become a 'grim and agonised *Dark Knight* (Nolan 2008). Joe Wright's recent version of *Pride and Prejudice* (2005) is an example of how this also influences our depiction of the past:

> I wanted to treat *Pride and Prejudice* as a piece of British realism rather than going with the picturesque tradition, which tends to depict an idealized version of English heritage as some kind of Heaven on Earth. I wanted to make Pride and Prejudice real and gritty. (in Higson, 2009: 213)

The same evolution holds true for medieval films. The merry and brightly coloured world of *Ivanhoe* or *The Adventures of Robin Hood* are replaced with more grim, muddy and bloody renderings such as *Braveheart* or *The Messenger*.

While *Häxan* (1922) would now be considered to be outdated and perhaps not even gruesome at all, it was criticised in *Variety* (1923) for its 'morbid realism' which made the film 'absolutely unfit for public exhibition'. Even in case of *The Seventh Seal* (1957), a film which in modern standards almost offers no horror at all, which was at the time criticised for the 'force of the images of cruelty, squalor, and beastliness' which triggered 'nausea' and 'repulsiveness' (Powell, 1975: 55). Today, it is *Black Death* (2010) of which a critic (Nemiroff, 2011b) wrote that 'this is 102 minutes of death after death topped off with disturbingly inhumane behaviour and it eats away at you'. From a narrative perspective, however, these last two films are doing something quite similar as both use the plague as a signifier for what they see as fundamentally wrong in our modern society and offer in fact a strategy to cope with it. Similarly, *The Pied Piper*, as an example of Demy's typical 'self-contained fantasy worlds' which are real and artificial at the same time (Vincendeau, 2009: 10; Hill, 2008: 48; Cook, 2004: 465; Billard, 1964: 25), may be a fairy-tale like construction of the medieval, but essentially it tells a similar story to *Anazapta*. In other words, the same narrative can be told in different possible styles or genres.

5.3 Conclusion

In this chapter we focussed on the construction of the Dark Ages as an age of primitiveness and extremity. In the first section, we focussed on the representation of the Black Death, which according to De la Bretèque (2004: 699-700) truly defined the Middle Ages as a Dark Age. More than being a historical episode in Western European history between 1347 and 1353, the meaning of the Black Death in films on the Dark Ages is greatly influenced by two different traditions.

First, *The Seventh Seal* is primarily not a reconstruction of Sweden in 1350 (Aberth, 2003: 216-243) and reading *Black Death* as a reflection of fourteenth century England can only lead to the conclusion that the film is '*plagued* by historical inaccuracies' (Von Tunzelman, 2012, italics mine). The construction of the plague in *The Seventh Seal* and *Black Death* follows the tradition that originated in Hebrew and Greek literature in which the plague is not an affair of the body, but an affair of the mind (Crawfurd, 1914: 1). The plague is seen as a punishment for human transgression in which the narrative focuses on the disintegration of society and the psychological effects on the people. However, in line with Gordon (1997), the meaning of the plague in these two films most closely resembles the modern literary tradition of plague narratives, which originated after the last outburst of the plague on European soil in Marseille in 1721. According to Gordon (1997: 70), the plague is a symbol for an 'uncontrollable force not outside human association but internal to it', and can be seen as the antithesis of modern society. Despite the modern and rational society, the plague is a signifier for those elements which can still tear society down.

In *The Seventh Seal*, the plague is a signifier for Bergman's own personal crisis. After having lost his faith, he represented the Church as an institute that was mostly responsible for the fear and terror in society. The film is about Bergman's struggle against modernity, or about the 'terror of emptiness in *life*' (Gado, 1986: 196). However, in the end the main character Antonius Block finds meaning, or an earthly equivalent to faith, in the bowl of strawberries symbolising the simple but pure love of the family of the travelling artists. *Black Death* reflects on the threat of (bio)terrorism in a post 9-11 context of religious violence and fanaticism. The film focuses on the consequences of fundamentalism by showing how easily terror and violence leads to only more terror and violence. Essentially, the film constructs a *radicalisation narrative* that demonstrates how people, who become victims of this violence, can get so obsessed with their grief and vengeance that they radicalise themselves. Smith (in Nemiroff, 2011a) called his film 'a meditation on what it is to be a fundamentalist and how religion can be used by the wrong people in the wrong hands that corrupt innocent people'.

In line with Gordon's description of plague narratives, both films have an ambivalent attitude towards modern society. The meaninglessness Bergman experienced in the mid-twentieth century, or the religious fanaticism and fundamentalism of the beginning of the twenty-first century are fundamental issues inherent to contemporary modern society. But where Antonius Block found meaning in the simple beauty and love, *Black Death* offers a more pessimistic view.

Second, where the plague in *The Seventh Seal* and *Black Death* was a collective or a societal *disease*, but a disease nonetheless, the plague in *The Pied Piper*, *The Advocate* and *Anazapta* is represented as a *cure* or a *blessing*. And where the social plague strikes indiscriminately, the plague as a cure is selective and only kills those responsible for the darkness in medieval society. This tradition originated in the nineteenth-century German tradition of 'Gothic Epidemiology', which gave the Black Death a silver lining as it ended the medieval. Soon it became linked to a Hegelian philosophy of history where the plague was the necessary evil or the required catastrophe to end the medieval. However, the way this is translated into film is by constructing the plague as a secular Great Flood Myth (*Genesis* 6: 5-8). First, these films construct a medieval dark world focusing on the wickedness of medieval man who is 'only intent at evil continually'. In *The Pied Piper*, it is the feudal exploitation of the people, to the point where Franz wants to let the children of Hamelin die in his wars, and the dogmatic and Anti-Semitic Church, that can be seen as the source of all wickedness. *The Advocate* focuses on the inherent injustice of the legal system which allows the elite to commit horrible crimes without ever being held responsible. And in *Anazapta*, it is the general state of (extreme) sin of the medieval word that is being accused, mostly symbolised in the village rape on Joan de Basset. And just as God became grieved in His heart and wiped mankind of the earth, except Noah, who had found grace in the eyes of the Lord, an external character with supernatural powers will spread the plague in these films. This character will selectively kill only those responsible for the darkness in medieval society. In *The Pied Piper*, it is the piper himself who spreads the plague when he does not get the money he was promised. He takes the children of Hamelin with him and leads them to the upcoming sun, or modernity. In *The Advocate*, it was not Courtois' enlightened vision on the law and justice that would bring the light to Abbeville, but it was a plague-stricken knight in armour that shines like the sun who was the promised blessing. In other words, the *blessing* that foretold his coming, was a blessing for Western society as a whole. In *Anazapta*, it was the man known as Jacques de Saint Amant, who was the Reckoning for the sins of the village. As Joan de Basset swore, she would be revenged by yelling 'Anazapta', a charm against sickness. This makes the plague in *Anazapta* to be a cure, with the medieval as the disease. As a perverse Saint Roch, the man under the name of Jacques de Saint Amant is not protecting us from the plague, but is delivering us from the medieval by spreading the plague.

	The Wickedness of Man (The Medieval)	**The Great Flood (The Plague)**	**The Chosen One (Modernity)**
The Pied Piper	Feudal exploitation (The Lord and his son) / Dogma and Anti-Semitism (The Bishop)	The Piper	The Children dressed in white, the travelling artists and Gavin
The Advocate	Private Law (The Lord and Pincheon), Injustice and Anti-Semitism (The Lord and his Son)	The Knight in Shining Armour (Blessing)	Courtois and his clerk Matthieu
Anazapta	Feudalism, Village Rape (The Lord, the Priest and the people)	Christ/Saint Roch inspired Angel of Vengeance	Mathilda and Randall

By telling the story of the Black Death in the same way as the Great Flood Myth, a modern myth or a secular exemplum is being shown that should inspire the audience to follow the example of the protagonist(s). Essentially, these films are implicitly celebrating the modern values of enlightened modern society, or what Hollister (1992: 7) called the 'indestructible fossil of the self-congratulatory Renaissance humanism'. However, these films can also be read as a warning not to let these elements of the Dark Ages return by reminding us to what may happen if we, again, should persist in medieval wickedness.

The iconography of the plague in films on the Dark Ages confirms the secularising trend in representing the plague. Except some smaller references such as the dark cloud in *Anazapta*, which could refer to the miasmatic theory, the danse macabre in *The Seventh Seal* or the Saint Roch mark on the chest of the character of Jacques de Saint Amant in *Anazapta*, the plague is usually visualised by means of buboes, flagellants and pest doctors. The specific way these signs of the plague are visualised, is largely dependent on the genre of the film. Remarkably, despite the different genres and considerable stylistic differences, *The Pied Piper*, *The Advocate* and *Anazapta* essentially tell the same story on the Dark Ages. In the next section we will elaborate on the Dark Ages imaginary by focusing on the iconography of the Dark Ages and how it relates to the narrative.

In the second part of the chapter we focussed on the question whether or not there is a visual style, or an iconography that is specifically used for the Middle Ages as the Dark Ages. As could be expected, the 'insistent filth and squalor' (Sobchack, 1997: 9-10) is mostly used a signifier for the Dark Ages. It gives the (audio)visual translation of an age of filth, deformity, sickness and general primitiveness. Moreover, it is

assumed that these elements make the medieval dark world more accurate, authentic or, in general, more *real*. However, more than only neutral signs that refer to the Middle Ages as the Dark Ages, related to the medievalist tradition, these elements also implicitly judge this medieval world compared with modernity. Rotten teeth, for example, are not a neutral sign, but refer to an age when the people had no notice of personal hygiene and not the science, or the dentistry, to do something about it. Following an implicit narrative of progress, seemingly innocent elements such as the landscapes or the seasons, construct a medieval world where daily life was still extremely hard. The bad climate (rain, wind, snow, …) that is often seen in these films, is not a neutral reflection of common seasonality, but is an expression of an age where the people had to fight a never-ending battle against the elements.

Similarly, where many of the stories or events portrayed on the screen are indeed historically documented, this does not make them representative for the Middle Ages. Early modern-events such as the witch- or animal trails, medieval aberrations such as Gilles de Rais or the *Malleus Malleficarum* are repeatedly constructed in a medieval world, where it is suggested that these elements are also representative for the period as a whole. In other words, in films on the Dark Ages as an extreme age, the exception has become the rule.

There is no century that captures the idea of the Dark Ages as an extreme age more than the fourteenth century. Not only was it historically an age of extremes, with wars, famines or the Black Death, it is also dramatically interesting age as it offers the darkest moment just before the dawn. It is not only a calamitous century, but also a pivotal century just before the coming of modernity. But more than only a reflection of an extreme age, this century is also constructed as the anti-type of the 'Age of Chivalry'. *The Advocate* and *La Passion Béatrice*, for example, constructed the fourteenth century by reversing the concepts of this idealised medieval construct. The Dark Ages are an age without victories or glory as there is only cowardice, loss and disappointment. Although many films still refer to the same elements of the 'Age of Chivalry' (duels, banquets and the concept of chivalry), the way these are constructed is completely reversed. Although this might also be perceived as more 'realistic', this is in part also a construct aimed to replace another (idealised) construct. The event that best captures this feeling of loss is the Battle of Crecy, that regardless of who tells the story, will always frame the battle negatively.

However, although these elements are intrinsically linked to the Middle Ages as the Dark Ages, they are no exclusive features of these Dark Ages. There are many examples of iconogrammes that evoke the meaning of the Dark Ages, as both a strategy of obtaining (hyper)realism as well as the expression of an implicit narrative of progress, but we argue that the Dark Ages imaginary is best to be seen in the context of a narrative, with the iconography supporting it. These elements of filth, hardship or tyranny may also appear in other kinds of narratives. The (audio)visual

elements serve as the flesh and blood around the narrative bones of the Dark Ages structure.

The importance of the narrative compared with the iconography will be further addressed in the next chapter. There we will offer an example with *Season of the Witch* of where the Dark Ages iconography and narratives are being triggered, but not followed, and *Agora*, where a Dark Ages narrative is constructed that is completely set in Late-Antiquity in the iconography of the peplum genre.

VI Two Explorations

In this last chapter we offer two additional analyses of films which were not included in the corpus. In this study we selected feature films, made in the Western world, that were set during the medieval times and represented the Middle Ages as a dark age characterised as the age of feudalism, dogmatism and primitiveness and extremity. First, we will reflect on the European character of the corpus that was the result of these selection criteria. Second, the idea that the Dark Ages imaginary is a narrative rather than an iconography will be further explored.

6.1 The American Dark Ages in *Season of the Witch*

Although it was not one of the selection criteria, the corpus of this study consisted quasi exclusively of European films. As can be seen in the short presentation of the films (see supra 2.2.3), almost all films were produced in Europe, based on European stories, directed by European directors, with the major creative contributors being European, and were mainly influenced by European medievalist traditions. However, there are some smaller exceptions. *The Pied Piper*, for example, was produced by an American (Sagittarious Production) and a British (Goodtimes Enterprises) company. The incentive to make *Le moine et la sorcière* came from Pamela Berger, a professor of art at Boston College (US), and the film was co-funded by the American National Endowment for the Humanities. And *Pope Joan* was based on the novel *Pope Joan* by the American writer Donna Woodfolk Cross. But arguably, none of the results indicate that these elements had a decisive influence on the film.

The most recurring countries in films on the Dark Ages are France (*La Passion Béatrice*, *Le moine et la sorcière* and *The Advocate*) and England (*The Reckoning*, *Anazapta* and *Black Death*), followed by Italy (*The Name of the Rose* and *Pope Joan*), Scandinavia (*Häxan* and *The Seventh Seal*) and Germany (*The Pied Piper* and *Pope Joan*). At the surface most films present themselves as being either fully French, Scandinavian or British. This is mostly visible in the cast. Both *Le moine et la sorcière* and *La Passion Béatrice*, for example, had a predominant French cast. *The Advocate*, produced by the BBC, was praised in *The New York Times* (Maslin, 1994) for its 'distinguished British cast' (e.g. Nicol Williamson, Colin Firth, Jim Carter, Ian Holm and Donald Pleasance). The same holds true for *The Reckoning* which also relied on a

strong British cast, except for Willem Dafoe (e.g. Paul Bettany, Brian Cox, Gina McKee and Simon McBurney). Also *Anazapta*, relied on a strong British cast (e.g. Lena Headay, Jason Flemyng and Jon Finch). The main cast in *Black Death* consists of British actors such as Sean Bean, Eddie Redmayne, John Lynch (actually Irish) and Tim McInnerny, with Dutch actress Carice van Houten (whose role was originally to be played by Lena Headey) and the Dutch Tygo Gernandt (who plays a mute) as exceptions. Only *The Name of the Rose* aspires to go beyond, and shows a more diverse international cast as a reflection of the micro-cosmos in the thirteenth-century abbey in northern Italy. Beneath the surface of these films, however, they easily refer to the same medievalist traditions. *The Reckoning*, for example, while set in England, with a British cast and director, and referring to the English myth of the Norman Yoke, still resonates French ideas on feudalism. *The Advocate* is produced by the BBC, with a strong British cast, but set in France, based on the French medievalist concept of feudalism, related to the French literary genre of the fabliaux and includes a German-born concept of the plague. *The Pied Piper* is set in Germany, based on a story by the British writer Robert Browning, has a strong British cast (e.g. Donald Pleasance, John Hurt or Donovan), was directed by Jacques Demy and is strongly influenced by the French idea of feudalism. As the Dark Ages imaginary is more closely related to a leftist discourse it has – at least in theory – little nationalistic impulses. However, Italy seems to have no real affinity with the Middle Ages in the cinema, except for their 'own' literary giants such as Boccaccio or Dante. And also Germany, except the *Nibelungen*, showed no real interest in the Middle Ages (De la Breteque, 1990: 270; Mourier, 1990: 244-245). However, only recently German cinema made *Pope Joan* (Wortmann 2009), *Vision - Aus dem Leben der Hildegard von Bingen* (Von Trotta 2009) and *Black Death* (Smith 2010).

Many authors have claimed that there is a difference between how the American and the European cinema deal with the medieval past. Burger and Kruger (2009: 237), for example, related the 'Hollywood Middle Ages' with 'myth and popular legend, romance, grand historical conflict, and courtly intrigue', while the European Middle Ages were characterised with 'high, poetic or narrative art' (see also Finke and Shichtman, 2010: 156-180; Kelly, 2007: 283; Aronstein, 2005; De la Bretèque, 2004: 161; Airlie, 2001: 165; Kawa-Topor, 2001b: 9; Lagorio, 1989: 15-169). In the next section, we offer a case-study where a recent American-made film, *Season of the Witch* (Sena 2011), relies heavily on the Dark Ages imaginary.[100] Not only does the film refer to the rationalist and the romantic tradition on representing medieval witchcraft, but the film is structurally indebted to *The Seventh Seal* as well. This offers an opportunity

[100] *Season of the Witch* (2010), produced by Atlas Entertainment (US) and Relativity Media (US), directed by Dominic Sena (US) and written by American based writer Bragi F. Shutz.

to analyse how the American cinema relates to the European concept of the Dark Ages. Do the elements of the Dark Ages imaginary have the same meaning in America as they have in Europe? For example, when in 1996 the Marquette University of Milwaukee held a re-enactment of the death of Joan of Arc at the stake they received unforeseen complaints because the burning of the cross reminded people of the KKK as well as the burning of Southern churches (Meltzer, 2003). Moreover, witchcraft in America has another connotation than it has in Europe as in America witch trials primarily refer to the Salem trials (1692-1693). These Salem trials have already proven to be a fertile ground of inspiration for cultural depictions (Levin, 1955). The meaning of Salem is dominated Arthur Miller's *The Crucible* (1952), who made Salem into a metaphor for McCarthyism in the US (Banfield, 2008: 123; Morgan, 1997: 128-129; Ansen, 1996: 80; De la Bretèque, 2004: 687; Decter, 1997: 54-56; Gates and Chang, 1996: 76).

In this section we argue that *Season of the Witch* (Sena 2011) is not to be analysed according to its faithfulness to the known historical sources, but only by understanding medievalist codes, traditions and (filmic) intertextuality. When read from this perspective, *Season of the Witch* created new meaning by combining a dominant interpretation of Ingmar Bergman's *The Seventh Seal*, European traditions on representing medieval witchcraft, contemporary perspectives on the Crusades and Susan Aronstein's (2005: 1-2) concept of 'Hollywood Arthuriana'. However, as this demands a lot of medievalist capital to fully understand, *Season of the Witch* in the end may have lost its coherence for the audience.

In *Season of the Witch*, written by Bragi F. Schut and directed by Dominic Sena, two fourteenth century knights have to escort a girl accused of witchcraft to an abbey in Severac where the monks will decide on her guilt. When the film was released in January 2011, it was picked to pieces by the critics. The story of the film was considered to be 'ridiculous', flawed with historical inaccuracies and poorly executed mainly due to 'unconvincing' CGI and bad acting (Barker, 2011: 25 & 29; Endrenyi, 2011; Guzmán, 2011; Morris, 2011; Neumaier, 2011; Berardinelli, 2011; Catsoulis, 2011; Whitty, 2011; Travers, 2011; Gray, 2011: 73-74). Despite this poor reception by the critics, *Season of the Witch* is a remarkable example of how meaning is constructed in medieval films.

6.1.1 The Meaningful Act of *The Seventh Seal*

The main narrative structure of *Season of the Witch* is highly indebted to Ingmar Bergman's 1957 classic *The Seventh Seal*. Both films focus on two men returning from the Crusades: a disillusioned knight who is struggling with his faith (Antonius

Block/Behmen von Bleibruck) and his more down-to-earth Sancho Panza-like side-kick (Jöns/Felson). While returning to their homelands, they arrive in a plague-stricken land for which a young girl is accused of being the source of this evil.[101]

More importantly, *Season of the Witch* closely follows the meaning of *The Seventh Seal*. Although there is a lot of debate on the possible meaning(s) of *The Seventh Seal*, essentially the film deals with a knight who has lost his former certainties and ideals during the Crusades and is now struggling to find meaning in life. And although Block's time has come, he stalls Death by engaging Him in a game of chess which enables Block to make 'one meaningful act', which is mostly interpreted as him saving the family of the travelling artists from the hands of Death. From this perspective, we follow the interpretation that the main theme of this film is not death, but how to deal with the 'terror of emptiness in life' (Gado, 1986: 196; see supra, 5.1.1a, p. 199). The meaning of the plague in this context is therefore most likely to be read as a signifier for a sinful or dysfunctional society on which contemporary feelings of disintegration, deep-rooted fear or pessimism can be projected (Cohn Jr., 2002: 703; Boeckl, 2000; Girard, 1974: 835; Crawfurd, 1914: 39). Just like Antonius Block, Behmen von Bleibruck is a disillusioned crusader struggling with his faith after having experienced traumatic events during the Crusades. These experiences made him desert the Crusades, but not much later he gets caught and is condemned to be hanged for desertion. However, just as Block, he gets the opportunity to avoid his impending death if he escorts a young girl accused of witchcraft to the abbey of Severac. And as he does not believe the girl to be a witch, he accepts the offer to escort her to Severac, on condition that she gets a fair trial, which will be his last meaningful act in life. In other words, just as *The Seventh Seal*, *Season of the Witch* essentially focuses on finding meaning in life during a journey that can be seen as spiritual as well as physical.

6.1.2 Representing Medieval Witchcraft

Although the first evidence of organised witch hunting dates back to 1420 and the most notorious witch crazes took place between 1562 and 1630, the persecution and execution of witches by the Church has become intrinsically bound with the Middle Ages in the popular mind. It seems to fit naturally with the superstition, misogyny and intolerance that is so easily linked with the concept of the medieval (Dendle, 2008: 117-123; Pernoud, 1997: 86-100; Bloch, 1991: 7). Despite the fact that witchcraft plays a central role in *Season of the Witch*, the film does not explain the enigmatic

[101] In addition both films also include the passage of a group of flagellants in the city and the crossing of a dark forest which will claim a life.

historical occurrence of the (perceived) reality of medieval witchcraft, but instead explicitly connects it with the popular traditions of representing medieval witchcraft (Klaniczay, 2010: 188-212; Gaskill, 2008: 1069-1088; Obermeier, 2008: 218-229; Tuczay, 2007: 52-68; Roper, 2006: 117-141; Hutton, 2004: 413-434; De la Bretèque, 2004: 654; Briggs, 1996: 298 & 404-405; Smith, 1992: 99-127; Monter, 1972: 435-451). Already in the opening scene, *Season of the Witch* explicitly refers to the two dominant nineteenth-century traditions that to this day are mostly responsible for the contemporary understanding of European medieval witchcraft: the rationalist and the romantic tradition (see supra, 4.2). In this scene, set in Villach in 1235 AD, three women accused of witchcraft and consorting with the devil are led up a bridge to be hanged.


Rationalist witch


Romantic witch


***Real* Witch**

The first witch, a young and innocent looking girl, is desperately crying and out of sheer terror she confesses whatever the priest wants her to confess. The contrast between this poor girl and the merciless church is emphasised by the fact that despite she has confessed all the priest wanted her to confess she still has to hang. Apparently, as the priest explains to her, only her soul can be saved while her body still has to be 'consigned to God'. This witch can be seen as a representative of the rationalist tradition on European medieval witchcraft. The second witch to be hanged in the opening scene of *Season of the Witch* is an older woman who yells out to the priest that she only made an ointment for a cough out of pigs fat. However she seems to be accused of making some kind of magical potion. She can be seen as a representative of the romantic tradition (Raiswell, 2008: 124-134; Shen, 2008: 26 & 29; Rearick, 1971: 76-84; Michelet, 1966: 112 & 284-285, 1990: 3).

In *Season of the Witch*, the main character of the accused witch that Behmen has to escort to Severac, is also modelled onto the rationalist tradition. Again, her character is copied from the young girl from *The Seventh Seal* that has been accused of bringing the plague to the lands. The girl from *The Seventh Seal* has in addition clearly been tortured which made her confess anything, but it is clear that she is not to her full senses. Nothing indicates that she is a witch and, as Antonius Block adds, even if she had sought the devil, she has not found him and the last thing she will see on this earth is emptiness. This character from *The Seventh Seal* has become one of the main protagonists in *Season of the Witch* for it is her that Behmen and Felson should escort

to Severac where she will be judged by the monks. Especially during the first half of the film, the girl closely follows the rationalist tradition. During the journey, for example, the girl tells the story of what happened to another girl of her village, who was also accused of witchcraft and was condemned to an ordeal by water. That girl was cast into the lake and as she remained afloat, this meant that the pure water rejected her which proved that she was a witch and had to be burned. If she had been innocent the pure water would have accepted her, which meant that she should have drowned.[102] In other words, in both cases she would be killed by the church which contradicts our modern understanding of a fair trial. Extra elements also emphasise the girl's innocence during the journey to Severac. A knight who accompanies Behmen and Felson, for example, even explicitly doubts the fact that the girl can be held responsible for bringing the plague because even without a girl being seen in his village, the plague did come. Later, he goes on to claim that the girl is a victim of a powerless church who needed a scapegoat to save their credibility. And also Behmen, when he first laid eyes on the young girl and was told that she was accused of witchcraft immediately said: 'That is not what I see'. Taking her to Severac and guaranteeing her a fair trail becomes for him the one meaningful act. In presenting the young girl in this way, the film tries to evoke the 'generic expectation' or in Jauss' term the 'horizon of expectation' that can be expected based upon readings of earlier similar texts (Neale, 1990: 56-57). Everyone familiar with the rationalist tradition in representing medieval witchcraft will expect that a girl accused of witchcraft by the Church in a medieval context is usually innocent.

6.1.3 An American Twist: the Crusades and the 'Hollywood Arthuriana'

By closely following the structure and meaning of *The Seventh Seal* and by focusing on the rationalist tradition of representing medieval witchcraft, *Season of the Witch* creates a story in which Behmen, struggling to find meaning in life, evades a certain death which enables him to make one meaningful act in life: guaranteeing an innocently looking girl a fair trial while protecting her from a torturing priest. Yet, despite these clear references, in the end the meaning of *Season of the Witch* fundamentally diverges from *The Seventh Seal* as well as from the rationalist tradition. Two elements are mainly responsible for this shift in meaning. First there is the inclusion of a large segment at the beginning of the film that actually shows the Crusades which was completely absent in (and would be irrelevant to) *The Seventh Seal*. And second there is the inversion of meaning where the girl accused of

[102] According to the story the girl tells in the film, the priests put stones in the pockets of the other girl so she would certainly drown. But as she even then remained afloat, she was burned.

witchcraft is no innocent victim of the Church, but guilty as charged. We argue that *Season of the Witch* in the end has to be seen as a recent example of the 'Hollywood Arthuriana'.

The lead that connects *Season of the Witch* to this American form of cinematic medievalism comes from the inclusion of the opening scenes on the Crusades. In *Season of the Witch*, we get to see five different battles that according to the film are set in 'The Age of the Crusades': the battle at the Gulf of Edremit (1332 AD), the siege of Tripoli (1334 AD), the battle of Imbros (1337 AD), the battle of Artah (1339 AD) and the battle of Smyrna (1344 AD). In its most commonly used definition, the Crusades covered nine military expeditions which started with the call to arms of Urban II at Clermont in 1095 and ended with the fall of Acre in 1291, meaning that the battles shown in *Season of the Witch* take place after these crusades. However, although the ninth crusade was already of a very different nature than the first, the idea of crusading persisted after the fall of Acre and many more military actions under official papal instigation were undertaken in the East after 1291 (Riley-Smith, 1999: 1-14, 1977: 12-13; Housley, 2006). The battles shown in the film are in fact events from several campaigns undertaken by the papacy in the Eastern Mediterranean area that started under Clement V (1305-1314). The last event of these Crusades that is shown in the film is the siege of Smyrna in 1344 which occurred in the crusade that was launched by Clement VI in 1342 who organised a 'Latin naval league' in order to fight the Turkish emirates in Anatolia (Housley, 1986: 12 & 32-34). But despite this historical support, *Season of the Witch* only generally refers to these battles as 'The Age of the Crusades' (italics mine). And although many of the battles were essentially naval expeditions, the film nonetheless uses the more recognisable general iconography of knights and Templers fighting in the desert. Also the last battle shown in the film, the battle of Smyrna, seems to echo the massacre that followed the siege of Jerusalem in 1099 when the radical and fanatical head of the Templers shouts 'Let none survive!' thereby again introducing a massacre. It would appear that it was not the filmmakers' intent to refer to the specific history of the late Eastern Mediterranean crusades, but they only used these specific battles to activate the contemporary general meaning of 'the crusades'.

Already during the First Gulf War (1990-1991) explicit parallels were made between the coalition led by the U.S. and the Crusades. And when George W. Bush used the word 'crusade' in a speech after the attacks of 9/11, preceding a second invasion of Iraq in 2003, the analogy between the recent tensions in the Middle East and the Crusades again became widespread. With *Kingdom of Heaven* (Scott 2005) this became also visible in the cinema where the film explicitly made the connection between the time of the Crusades and the conflict in the Middle East by stating that 'nearly a thousand years later, peace in the Kingdom of Heaven remains elusive' (Tyerman, 2004: 8, 198 & 209; Aberth, 2003: 71). By making this link, the film

inscribes itself in the tradition of what Susan Aronstein (2005: 1-2) called 'Hollywood Arthuriana': 'a generic tradition […] based on a politics of nostalgia that responds to the cultural crisis by first proposing an Americanised Camelot as a political ideal and then constructing American knights to sit at its Round Table. In their return to Camelot to provide a vision of national identity and a handbook for American subjectivity, these films participate in America's continual appropriation of the medieval past which, from the late nineteenth century on, has responded to attacks on traditional models of authority, masculinity, and national identity and legitimacy by retreating into an ideal past.' Aronstein (2005: 2) argues that especially during times of national crises, such as the 'redscare of the 1950's, the breakdown of authority in the 1960s and 1970s, the turn to the right in the 1980s, the crisis in masculine and national definition in the 1990s', there is a tradition in films that proposes an 'ideal medieval past as the solution to a troubled present'. Ever since the link between the White House and Camelot was made explicit after the death of JFK, the Arthurian world in the cinema has gained an extra layer of meaning where they allegorically could be read as a commentary on the national and especially the foreign policies (Finke and Shichtman, 2010: 156-180; Kelly, 2007: 284; De la Bretèque, 2004: 161; Lagorio, 1989: 151-169). By referring to the Crusades, *Season of the Witch* inscribes itself in this tradition that allegorically reflects upon contemporary American society.

In line with Aronstein's definition this film comments upon a moment of national crisis as the wars in Iraq and especially Afghanistan seemed to be never ending and unwinnable, thereby reminding of the American trauma of Vietnam. This is reflected in *Season of the Witch* by representing the battles of the crusades in a downward spiral under continuing deteriorating circumstances. Just as the war in Iraq in 2003 started triumphantly, the first battle in the film is still enthusiastically fought under a blue and sunny sky by crusaders Behmen and Felson. When the first battle at the Gulf of Edremit commences a vague 'hallelujah' even resounds in the background. But as the battles seem to go endlessly on and on, the sky gets darker and the weather gets grimmer. At a certain point both Behmen and Felson start to question what they are doing there. During the battle of Arthah Felson yells that 'God has too many enemies', to which Behmen replies that 'being his friend is not so easy either'. During the battle of Smyrna, when Behmen accidentally kills an innocent woman, both Behmen and Felson cannot bear to go on and desert the crusade. When Behmen and Felson leave the crusades, the film explicitly makes the link to *The Seventh Seal* by including a visual quote of two crusaders returning to their homeland using the same image of the rocky coastline. And by referring to the later crusades in the Eastern Mediterranean, and especially by having Behmen and Felson quit them after the battle of Smyrna in 1344 the film is able to make a direct link to the year 1348, the year of the Black Death and *The Seventh Seal*.

The Seventh Seal

Season of the Witch

By linking itself to *The Seventh Seal*, *Season of the Witch* bridges the concept of the Crusades with the concept of doubt. But where the doubt of Antonius Block can be seen as an existentialist doubt, most probably reflecting Bergman's personal doubts, the doubt of Behmen reaches much further. From the perspective of the Crusades, it can be seen as the doubt of the American society related to the interventions in the Middle East. When Behmen returns to his homelands, we see the same church that launched the Crusades harshly persecuting innocent-looking girls on dire accusations of witchcraft and bringing the plague to the land. And by linking this to the rationalist tradition of *The Seventh Seal*, the film tries to raise viewer expectations to the innocence of the so-called witch. Again seen in the light of the contemporary meaning of the Crusades, this witch hunt could easily be linked to how the United States seem to deal with the issue of national security regarding terrorism and makes the shift from witch hunting to terrorist hunting (Zika, 2009: 9).[103] The meaning of the plague can in this context be seen as the deep-rooted pessimism regarding the conflict in the Middle East or even as the deep-rooted fear of terrorism.

The meaning of the film makes a crucial shift when the witch at the end of the film indeed turns out to *be* a witch.[104] Then the role of Behmen can no longer be the one of he who doubts, but he becomes a biblical Job who, although he is heavily tested by God and therefore starts to doubt, in the end will remain faithful to God. This also puts the role of the priest in a different perspective. Throughout the film the priest warns Behmen for the evil of the witch: although the girl seems to be innocent 'she sees the weakness that lies in our hearts'. Following the rationalist tradition the audience is led not to believe him, but in the end his advice proves to be right. This is also illustrated by having the witch trick the knight who openly declared that he did not believe in her guilt, after which she escapes and in the end will cost that knight's

[103] See for example Rapley, R. (2007). W*itch Hunts: From Salem to Guantanamo Bay*. Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press. Awan, M.S (2007). 'From Witch-hunts and Communist-hunts to Terrorist hunts: Placing Arthur Miller's *The Crucible* in the Post-September 11 Power Politics'. *Pakistan Journal of American Studies* 25, 1-2, pp. 1-22.

[104] In fact, at the end of the film the girl turns out to be possessed by a demon which makes her, technically speaking, not a witch. We argue that this nonetheless does not change anything fundamental to the meaning and the reading of film.

life. It is as if the priest is warning that although the intervention in the Middle East seems to be too costly in money as well as human lives compared to the result, it has to continue for the threat remains real. In other words, the priest is the spiritual guide for a nation in doubt (embodied in Behmen). It also justifies the hard measures taken by the Church in order to control the threat to the land, be it the plague or the threat of terrorism. Just as George W. Bush in his memoires *Decision Points* (2010) defended the use of torture in order to save lives, torturing the witch was legitimate in order to save the land before the plague could have reached truly apocalyptic proportions. By making the witch a real witch, and thus by making the threat of the plague real, the film seems to take up the defence of the country. It is as if the film wants to convince its audience that while the war efforts and 'witch hunting' on terrorists might seem to be costly, unjust and very hard, it nonetheless is necessary. As the girl at the end of the film says the plague was 'no ordinary fever' that would have passed on its own. Thereby she implies that the heroic effort of the fellowship was just and necessary.

In other words, *Season of the Witch* is a recent example of how in the 'Hollywood Arthuriana' the medieval past is revisited in order to 'reassure a troubled present'. It addresses the pessimism or even the defeatism that is filling the hearts of the Americans and warns them not to grow soft in the war on terror. Doing this, the film emphasises the values that are inherent to a medieval Arthurian world like heroism, loyalty and religion (Aronstein, 2005: 8; Driver and Ray, 2005: 5; Williams, 1990: 9). Behmen and Felson perfectly fit into this picture being the ideal knights who in the end are even willing to give their lives for the safety of the nation. The message, or the solution, the film gives to a nation in doubt is essentially to stand fast and carry on.

6.1.4 Conclusion

Analysing a medieval film like *Season of the Witch* according to its faithfulness to the known historical sources will not lead to a better understanding of the meaning of the film. In line with Eco's famous remark that before we speak of the Middle Ages we have to 'spell out what kind of Middle Ages we are talking about', the meaning of the Middle Ages is more often than not based upon cultural-historical traditions and codes rather than upon a meticulous reconstruction of a historical period. If read accordingly, this film is not only about two fourteenth century knights who have to escort a girl accused of witchcraft to an abbey in Severac where monks can decide on her guilt, but it can be understood as a reflection of and commentary upon contemporary American society. Central in the film is the notion of doubt as borrowed from *The Seventh Seal*, but by linking it to the crusades the meaning of this

doubt shifts to the doubt on the ongoing interventions in the Middle East and the witch hunt becomes the hunt for terrorists. By making the witch real in the end the film seems to advocate the hard measures taken by the American government in order to contain the terrorist threat.

Season of the Witch demonstrates that medievalist films refer to already established meanings and traditions rather than to historical evidence. The question remains, however, as this demands of lot of historical and medievalist capital, to what extent this might have threatened the perceived coherence for the viewer.

6.2 De Sancta Hypatia: *Agora* and the Dark Ages Imaginary

In this section we elaborate on the relation between the Dark Ages imaginary as a narrative and its iconography. In the previous chapter we concluded that the Dark Ages imaginary was primarily a narrative, and in this section we will offer an additional argument for this. We will claim that *Agora* (Amenabár 2009), a film on the events that led to the death of the Alexandrian mathematician and philosopher Hypatia (355? - 415), is primarily not to be read as a film on late Antiquity as its story has been rewritten and interpreted from how we, as moderns, have constructed the Middle Ages as a Dark Age. Although the film is set during late-Antiquity and the film as a whole looks like a peplum film, the story is constructed as a secularised *exemplum* implicitly celebrating the modern values of enlightened society, meant to incite more rationalism, humanism and tolerance amongst its viewers.

Agora (2009), the fifth feature film by the Chilean-Spanish director Alejandro Amenabár and co-written by Mateo Gil, tells the story of the Alexandrian mathematician and philosopher Hypatia (355? - 415) who became the victim of the power struggle between the Roman Prefect and the bishop of Alexandria. The film, according to the critics, had every reason to be considered as a film set in classical antiquity as the story dramatises events that took place between 391 AD and 415 AD, a time during which the Roman Empire – although in steep decline – still existed. More specifically, the film was recognised as a *peplum* from which the film indeed seems to borrow many elements: in terms of its iconography, the film features lavishly decorated sets with recognisably classical buildings, togas, swords and sandals and the inevitable battle scenes. On a narrative level the film also includes the typical slave revolt against their decadent Roman masters which on the whole makes the film seem very close to films like *Sign of the Cross* (DeMille 1932), *Quo Vadis* (Sienkiewicz 1951) or *Spartacus* (Kubrick 1960). Yet, although Amenabár has been called the 'ultimate genre filmmaker' (see Ortega, 2008: 53) in this chapter we will argue that at least three elements do not fit wider genre requirements. First, despite the characteristic mise-en-scène and the battle scenes, the film as a whole does lack the monumentality of its epic predecessors. Second, there is no typical muscular male body at the centre of the film which is considered to be a central element of the peplum. Third, the traditional meaning of the slave revolt of the good (and often Christian) slaves against the despotic Romans is diametrically reversed where the film seems to favor the Romans instead of the slaves. The critics did seem to notice that *Agora* was no 'normal' peplum and tried to remedy this by creating new sub-genre labels as for example a 'Spanish peplum', a 'modern peplum', a 'metaphysical

peplum' or even a 'fantastical peplum.'[105] We argue that even if *Agora* takes place at the onset of the Middle Ages and uses the iconography of Antiquity, this film is highly related to the Dark Ages imaginary.

Depicting Hypatia as a victim of early Christianity, as *Agora* does, is not new. Already in Edward Gibbon's *The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* (1776-1789) we see Hypatia as a victim of this barbaric new religion and also Charles Kingsley's *Hypatia, or New Foes with an Old Face* (1853) made her 'The Last of the Hellenes' (see Dzielska, 1995). However in order to construct Hypatia's story, *Agora* based itself most directly on *Cosmos* (1980), a popular documentary-series on the cosmos hosted and co-written by Carl Sagan, in which Sagan also shares Gibbon's and Kingsley's point of view. In the same tradition of Kenneth Clark's *Civilisation* (1969) and Jacob Bronowski's *The Ascent of Man* (1973), *Cosmos* aimed at popularising science with a personal touch, focusing in this case on astronomy. *Agora* is in many ways influenced by *Cosmos*. There are visual references to the series like for example to the way the library is constructed with its x-shaped shelves and Greek markings above it or like the entry to the Serapeum which is visually very similar to an Egyptian temple in *Cosmos* (see Carl Sagan's *Cosmos*, Episode 12: 'Encyclopedia Galactica').

The Alexandrian library (*Cosmos*)

The Alexandrian library (*Agora*)

[105] See, e.g. M. Goodridge. 2009. Agora. *Screen international* 1693: 20. F. Fourcart. 2010. Agora. Actualité de l'Antique. *Positif* 587: 36-37. E. Hynes, 2010. Sword-and-Sandals Epic Agora: Too Hard on the Crusaders!. *www.villagevoice.com*. Accessed on 01/02/2012. T. McCarthy. 2009. Agora. A visually imposing epic that ambitiously puts a pivotal moment in Western history onscreen. *Variety.com* Accessed on 1 February 2012. J.P. Guerand. 2009. Agora. Péplum à l'espagnole. *62ieme Festival de Cannes. Le film français, hors série:* 23. T.B. 2010. Agora. Un vrai-faux péplum sincère, mais un peu ampoulé. *Studio ciné live magazine* 11: 34. C. Chaudefaud. 2010. Il était une fois en Ibérique… les nouveaux succès du cinéma espagnol. *Studio ciné live magazine* 11: 80-81. F. Lecrec. 2010. Alejandro le bienheureux. *Studio ciné live magazine* 11: 83.

Egyptian temple (*Cosmos*)

Serapeum (*Agora*)

More than only visual reference, *Agora* also followed the rationale behind *Cosmos*. In these series, Carl Sagan often glorified the intellectual and scientific climate and realisations of Antique culture, symbolised in the Alexandrian Library as the summit of 'brain and glory' and where the 'seeds of modern world' could be found. When the Library was destroyed and the medieval times came this loss proved to be 'irreparable' as the Catholic church only pushed their 'doxological preferences' and punished every deviator with 'humiliation, taxation, exile, torture, or death'. The medieval times proved to a thousand year's night, or a 'long mystical sleep' which the Renaissance ended (Sagan, 1980: 16, 18, 53, 56, 183, 188 & 334-335).[106]

One of the central ideas behind the *Cosmos* series is who we, as mankind, are. But rather than providing us with exhaustive answers *Cosmos* tells us how we should look for it: through science. For example, by discovering and studying our DNA we have learned that mankind as a whole shares the same 'common organic chemistry and a common evolutionary heritage' which makes us 'a single kind of biology.' And the exploration of the cosmos is simply mankind taking the next step in this 'voyage of self-discovery' by looking for our place in the greater universe. This cosmic distance was important for Sagan because it made most 'human concerns seem insignificant.' This has to be seen in the context of the Cold War during which *Cosmos* was written, especially when Sagan goes on to declare national boundaries and fanatical ethnic or religious chauvinism to be irrelevant when looking at the earth from a cosmic distance. This plea for more rationalism and tolerance in the world was the main educational or even missionary drive behind *Cosmos*. Sagan popularised astronomy through a widely accessible TV-show so he could try to make people aware of his message:

> We, the nuclear hostages – all the peoples of the Earth – must educate ourselves about conventional and nuclear warfare. Then we must educate our governments. We must learn the science and technology that provide the only conceivable tools for our survival. (Sagan, 1980: xiii, 4, 24, 318, 331 & 333).

Such ideas of unity from a cosmic perspective and the importance of education are also two important threads in *Agora*. In the film, the cosmic perspective is not only

[106] The quotes are from the book (Sagan, 1980), based upon the miniseries.

shown literally as *Cosmos* did by showing the world from space, but also added the metaphor of the ant as shown just before the arrival of the Emperor's message, implying that seen from a higher perspective our petty human quarrels don't amount to much.

Another illustration of this point is the fact that during battle scenes the camera slowly rises, literally looking down on the turmoil, and by speeding up the frame-rate to create a visual parallel between the humans and the ants. This idea of unity is further underscored when Orestes and Synesius are quarrelling during Hypatia's lesson, she reminds them of Euclid's first rule: 'If two things are equal to a third thing, then they are all equal to each other.' This phrase used in the film is borrowed from a letter (n° 93) that the historical Synesius wrote to Hesychius (Fitzgerald, 1926: 178-179). In the film Hypatia clarifies the meaning of it as follows: 'More things unite us than divide us. Now, whatever may be going on in the streets, we are brothers. We are brothers.' These words are later repeated by Orestes when he tries to resolve the dispute between the Christians and the Jews: 'There are more things that unite us than divide us. We are brothers.'

Where *Cosmos* called for rationality during the Cold War, *Agora* engages itself in the present-day issues of religious violence and intolerance. And to this end, for Amenabár the history of Hypatia was a perfect parallel: 'I was looking for a connection to 1600 years ago, which we tend to consider very distant, but it's not as distant as we think. We're still the same' (Amenabár 2009). This perspective is made explicit in the film when Orestes, in despair, sighs at the sight of the religious violence in his city and uses words that perhaps make more sense to a modern audience than the city council that Orestes is addressing the film: 'How naïve of me. How naïve of me to think we had finally changed.' There is no coincidence in the costumes of the Parabalani resembling Taliban fighters, or the veil that is put on Hypatia when she is forced up the stairs of the Serapeum resembling a burqa or the fact that the filmmakers changed the way Hypatia was executed to stoning as a direct echo of present-day Taliban practices. The film pleads for a rational and more tolerant approach in this conflict for which Hypatia serves as a model. When she confesses in the town council that she only believes in philosophy, she is mocked by a member of the council: 'Philosophy, just what we need in times like these.' But where the member of the town council was being sarcastic, Amenabár is offering a valuable piece of advice to his filmic audience.

Also Carl Sagan's idea of education is echoed in *Agora* by including the slave character of Davus. His character – who is not mentioned in the historical sources on Hypatia, and neither does he appear in the work of Sagan, Gibbon or Kingsley – can be seen as an example of the positive consequences of education. Although Sagan praised the scientific nature of classical society, he criticised it for being too elitist and for keeping their wisdom to themselves. It was this attitude that resulted in the

burning of the library since its wisdom was not known and therefore had no meaning for the slaves (Sagan, 1980: 335). Where the Christians in *Agora* are indeed dogmatic, ignorant and therefore violent, Davus is not. He joins the Christians out of discontent with the social inequality between free men and slaves, but because he had heard the teachings of Hypatia, he is able to doubt and question any given statement rationally. Over the course of the film, and especially after the pogroms, we see him gradually coming to doubt the word of the Lord, since its literal interpretation led to a massacre. When at the end of the film he becomes involved in the brutal murder of his former mistress and teacher, Hypatia, he grants her a more merciful death by strangling her before she is to be stoned, and then throws his sword on the ground and walks away. He is the filmic example that an educated man is no longer capable of atrocious acts of intolerance based on dogmatic claims. This emphasis on education in films set in the Dark Ages also demonstrates that the right mindset is something that can be taught, even to slaves. On a meta-level this can also mean that the protagonist of the film is trying to educate the viewer of the film.

The central issue of *Agora* as a film following the concept of the intellectual Dark Ages is the conflict between a dogmatic mindset and a scientific one, as seen in the difference between Hypatia and the Christians. Throughout the film, we see a coming-of-age pattern where Hypatia evolves from a dogmatic pagan to an empirical scientist, an evolution that will eventually culminate in her discovery of the elliptic course of the planets. At first, blindly following Ptolemy who believed that the circle is the most prefect form, Hypatia only sees what the model tells her too see: 'It is not the heavens that errs, it are our eyes who deceive us.' But during the siege of the Serapeum she starts to doubt: 'just suppose that the purity of the circle has blinded us from seeing anything beyond it, in the same way that the glare of the sun blinds us from actually seeing the stars.' This moment marks the shift to an empirical and inductive scientific mindset that will allow her to experiment and as a result, unknowingly, to discover the principle of inertia by throwing a heavy bag from the mast on a moving ship (reminiscent of Galileo's tower-argument). From then on her thoughts become empirical which will lead her to her greatest discovery: 'What if we dared to look at the world just as it is? Let us shed for a moment every preconceived idea. What shape would it show us? What shape?' This is also very reminiscent, but in a somewhat different context, to the confession Antonius Block makes to Death in *The Seventh Seal*: 'I want knowledge. Not Faith. Not presumptions. Just knowledge.' By using the metaphor of reading (Ptolemy) versus seeing (science), dogmatism is being criticised.

In order to make empirical observations, and as the boat-experiment of Hypatia shows, protagonists in films on the Dark Ages embrace technology. It is probably no coincidence that during the sack of the Serapeum only Davus manages to knock over a statue using his weapon as a lever, where Ammonius only seconds before him

unsuccessfully tried to push the statue with only the strength of his arms. This is similar to how Johanna in *Pope Joan* manages to rebuild an ancient machine, how Melius performs experiments in his apothecary to find a cure for the plague, or the scientific instruments which William of Baskerville is trying to hide from the abbot when he comes to his room. Not incidentally we see William hide an astrolabe which also links him to astronomy and thus subtly places him at loggerheads with the Christian doctrines espoused by the abbot. Studying the universe can be seen in this context as one of the most humbling of sciences, as is the case in *Cosmos* and *Agora*, because it may reveal that we are but a small dot in the corner of a larger universe – which makes it also implicitly opposed to the Christian idea of mankind being at the centre of the universe.

Hypatia's rational mindset is heavily contrasted to the dogmatic Christians. The film implies it was the Christians who, by not questioning anything and by blindly following the Scriptures, brought the Dark Ages to Alexandria. This is emphasised by a disorienting shot that accompanies the entry of the Christians in the Serapeum after the siege where the camera literally tilts on its head and shows a world where everything has been brought upside down. And just as in *The Name of the Rose*, the loss of the library symbolises the loss of the memory of mankind. In a later shot of the film we see that the library has been reduced to a dark barn. When the Christians rise to power, *Agora* connects to three stereotypes on the Middle Ages. First, the rise of Christianity means a decline in science, symbolised in two discussions of astronomy. Second, the position of women deteriorated with the coming of the Christians. And third, the rise of the church also meant a steep incline in intolerance and more specifically anti-Semitism.

First, when the Christians are sitting on the stairs that lead to the Serapeum and are looking at the stars, not coincidentally the same stairs on which Hypatia started to doubt Ptolemy, we hear a Christian called Isidorus explaining his version on what the cosmos looks like:

> Don't you know that the universe is a gigantic chest? Heaven is the lid on top and the earth is the ground below. . . . The earth is flat! . . . Read the Scriptures. If the Earth is round, why don't the people at the bottom fall off? And what about the ones on the sides? Why don't they slide off? Think about that.

This literal and dogmatic reading of the Scriptures, resulting in a conception of a flat earth, is something commonly, but falsely, attributed to the Middle Ages. Every educated medieval man did not doubt that the earth was round. The 'Flat Earth Error' is therefore 'not the alleged medieval belief that the earth was flat, but rather the modern error that such a belief ever prevailed' (Russell, 1991: 3; see also Bishop, 2008). The film seems to refer to the ideas of Cosmas Indicopleustes who wrote in his *Christian Topography* that the cosmos was a huge, rectangular vaulted arch with the

earth as a floor, probably inspired by the Epistle to the Hebrews 9:15 which called the Tabernacle of Moses 'a sanctuary on this earth.' This is the version Isidorus in the film defends. But the work of Cosmas was only translated into Latin in 1706 and became known by an English translation made in 1897 and was not known or followed during the Middle Ages (Russell, 1991: 33-34 & 49).

Second, the film implies that when the Christians came into power, the position of women deteriorated. Although Hypatia's womanhood is called a 'sad condition' by the pagan friends of her father, she still has the freedom to teach and to move and speak freely amongst the elite. When the Christians take control of the city this freedom is completely taken away from her. Again, the Christians base themselves on a dogmatic reading of the Scriptures and more precisely on the first letter of Paul to Timothy of which Cyril reads the most notorious passage: from 2:8 till 2:12. In this letter, Paul describes not only how men should act (2:8), but also what is expected from women (2:9 – 2:15). In the film, however, Cyril only reads till 2:12:

> [2:8] I desire therefore that everywhere men should lift up holy hands in prayer without anger or disputing. [2:9] In like manner, I desire women to dress modestly with decency and propriety, not with braided hair or gold or pearls or expensive clothes [2:10] [but with what is proper for women who profess good works, *cut out in the film*] but with good deeds. [2:11] Let a woman learn in quietness in full submission. [2:12] I do not permit a woman to teach or to have authority over a man, but to be in silence.

Although the possible translations, as well as the possible meaning of this passage, is the subject of much scholarly discussion, the film again chooses to use the literal and dogmatic reading which again connects to the existing stereotype of the misogynistic Middle Ages (see e.g. Zamfir and Verheyden, 2008; Keener, 2007; Wall, 2004; Baldwin, 1995). By reading this passage, Cyril is directly attacking Hypatia by calling her a witch and expects everybody to kneel before the word of God, and 'embrace its truths'. The deterioration of the position of women with the coming of Christianity is something that is also made explicit in *Pope Joan*. During a storm her mother tells Johanna the myth of Wodan at the Well of Wisdom where he had to sacrifice one of his eyes in order to drink from the Well, after which, he passed his knowledge on, including to girls. Equally Aesculapius, the teacher and close adept of Antiquity is in favour of teaching girls. But in the new situation where Christianity had imposed itself, *manu militari* according to the film, this came to an end. The village priest, Johanna's father, is an almost hyperbolic example of this. He forbids the midwife to use herbs to ease his wife's pain during birth giving, because according to the word of our Lord 'in sorrow shall thou bring forth children.' When Johanna learns how to read and write, he calls her an 'unnatural creature' who will provoke the Wrath of God. Later in the Scola her Christian teacher reminds her, quoting St. Paul, that 'women are subservient to men as determined by the order of Creation in hierarchy and strength

of will' and during his lessons he punishes Johanna based on his interpretation of again the first letter of Paul to Timothy (quoting only 2: 12).

Third, *Agora* also implies that the rise of the Christians also meant the rise of anti-Semitism in Alexandria, thereby invoking the intolerant and more specifically the anti-Semitic image of the medieval church. First we see how the Christians are throwing stones at the Jews in the theatre for which the Jews retaliated by simulating a fire in the Church of St. Alexander and then stoning the Christians who came to help. This attack however gave the Christians the excuse to drive the Jews out of the city of Alexandria. Again, this is based upon a dogmatic reading of the Scriptures which is made clear in the speech that Cyril gives just after the massacre in the Church of St. Alexander:

> Yes, weep for them, for those who have done this know not of God, nor of love, nor of piety. They know not, because it is they who repeat the words of the Scriptures with no understanding at all. It is they who saw only a man when the son of God was standing in front of them. And it is they who, in their blindness, mocked him and crucified him [...] Weep for the Jews, those evil butchers of our Lord! [...] Because God has already condemned them. It is God's will that they live as slaves cursed and exiled until the end of time. Cursed and exiled!

This speech starts the pogrom, during which *Agora* makes a remarkable reference to the Holocaust by inserting visual quotes from *Schindler's List* (Spielberg 1993). During the pogrom we see Christians throwing furniture and possessions to the ground from an arcade, directly quoting the scene from *Schindler's List* when the Germans evacuate the ghetto and throw all the luggage down to the street. Shortly after this scene, *Agora* shows a stream of people walking under a bridge, scorned by the bystanders among whom one shouts 'Jews out', reminiscent of the little girl from *Schindler's List* screaming 'Goodbye Jews!'

These two references are not only 'innocent' quotes or winks to *Schindler's List*, but also imply a transfer of meaning from the Christians who are now as violent and intolerant as the Nazis were towards the Jews. On this topic *Agora* warns its audience about the consequences of fanatical devotion to dogmatic ideologies. This dogmatic stance against the Jews is also notable in *The Advocate* where the son of the local lord hunts Jewish boys, and in *The Pied Piper* with the burning of Melius, the Jew, accused of heresy by the church. This latter film even went on to claim in its closing credits that 'The religious persecution that followed [the Black Death] was to remain without parallel until this century' thereby again marking a parallel between medieval anti-Semitism and the Holocaust.

Although *Agora* is more nuanced in its depiction of Christians and Pagans, which we will not discuss here, the main distinction between dogma and empirical science is held till the end. Again echoing Sagan, the ending titles of the film state that 'Hypatia's mutilated body was dragged through the streets and burnt on a pyre. . . . Cyril seised

power of Alexandria. Much later, Cyril was declared a saint and doctor of the church.' Yet, despite this anti-Christian tone *Agora* uses the story of Hypatia as a martyr and an exemplum for the present which is, in addition, very close to the story of Saint Katherine of Alexandria. St. Katherine, who was the role model for Johanna in *Pope Joan* is described by her as follows:

> Katherine was so wise that the heathen emperor and his greatest scholars could not turn her from her faith. Instead she convinced the scholars that God exists and she spoke so wonderfully of his acts and paradise that they all became Christians on the spot [...] But she paid for her courage with her life. Many were afraid of her wisdom [...] And she taught us something important: we have to stay true to our convictions, no matter how high the price.

Both Damascius (ca. 460 - 540 AD), who wrote on Hypatia in his *Life of Isidore*, and Jacobus de Voragine (ca. 1228 - 1298 AD) who wrote the *Life of Saint Katherine* (chapter 231: De Sancta Katharina in his *Golden Legend*), attest that both women were of aristocratic descent and praised for their physical beauty, their dignity and their intellectual capacities (Damascius, 1999: 129). Both women also kept their virginity as Katherine betrothed herself to Christ (*Sponsa Christi*), and Hypatia to science (mutatis mutandis a *Sponsa Scientia*). Both women also preferred death above forsaking their ideals. In addition, according to the tradition St. Katherine is always naked when she is tortured, just as Hypatia is stripped naked in the film before she is stoned to death. But ironically, where the exemplum of St. Katherine was meant to reinforce the faith of her fellow Christians, Hypatia's example is meant to inspire contemporary people to follow her example in standing up for science, rationality and tolerance in the battle against dogma and intolerance. From this perspective, the last walk of Hypatia to the place where she will meet her death closely resembles the Passion of Christ. Hypatia, in the red dress symbolising martyrdom, is led up the hill of the Serapeum while being scorned (while the soundtrack uses music with Gregorian echoes). And again ironically, during Hypatia's last walk Davus does not reveal the fact that he knows Hypatia and becomes a new St. Peter who denied knowing Christ. Hypatia's Christ-like death, in other words, is meant to inspire people to stand up for rational and tolerant ideas.

In conclusion, despite the fact that *Agora* takes place in the early fifth century and looks like a peplum film, the film relies heavily on the Dark Ages imaginary. By focusing on an enlightened protagonist in a dark world in which she will have to recede in the end, we see an example of how a rational modern subject should behave when the times are (getting) dark. In case of *Agora*, Amenábar explicitly tried to link the events of Alexandria in the early fifth century to the contemporary issues of religious violence. In addition, the protagonist ensures that the right values live on by education, and on a meta-level through educating the audience.

As *Agora* demonstrates, the Dark Ages imaginary is not restricted to the period of the historical Middle Ages or those films that look medieval, which enables us to broaden the debate on medievalist films. Additional research could for example examine how this scheme also holds true for films that are set in a historical period that succeeds the Middle Ages. It can be expected that *1492: Conquest of Paradise* (Scott 1992) or *Luther* (Till 2003) will also be closely related to the Dark Ages imaginary. In the same way that *Agora* explores both the concerns of the past and those of the present, these films function not by exploring the historical realities of the Middle Ages, but instead by revealing how we still consider some aspects of the Middle Ages to be relevant to us and how we might go about dealing with them.

General Conclusion

The aim of this study was to identify and describe a specific, coherent and recurring construct of the Middle Ages as the Dark Ages in feature films. We analysed how these films construct a recognisable and understandable cinematic Dark Ages world, and how the stories that are told in this context can be meaningful to a modern audience. Following De La Bretèque (2004: 12-13) we call this the Dark Ages imaginary, or the sum of our beliefs about what constitutes the medieval as a dark age as expressed in feature films.

Films on the Dark Ages are medievalist films, which means that they have to be seen as the continuation of a cultural tradition in which the Middle Ages have constantly been invented and *re*invented as the preferred projection screen for our more fundamental modern concerns. Situated in the larger debate on historical films, we do not consider the historical layer, or its cognitive function, to be these films' primary function. This does not reduce them to pure aestheticism or entertainment as these films make the medieval relevant to the present. However, analysing these films according to a purely *presentist* reading neglects the meaning of the medieval in these films. This would imply that the historical period in which a film is set, is interchangeable with any other period. This is not the case for medievalist films. These films offer history by analogy, where the medieval is at once close enough for us to recognise it as *our* history, while at the same time being far enough removed to freely project our more fundamental concerns on this period. We argue that films on the Dark Ages primarily offer moralised history. Although these films are closely related to a self-congratulatory historiography glorifying (scientific) progress, they always include an inherent warning to the present not to let the elements we ascribe to the Dark Ages return and offer an example on how this should be done.

In order to study the cinematic construction of the Dark Ages, a corpus was selected that constructed the medieval as an age of feudal oppression, intellectual dogmatism and as an extreme and primitive age. Because of this thematic choice, the corpus included relatively neglected films (e.g. *La Passion Béatrice*, *Anazapta* or *Black Death*), as well as traditional and canonical films (e.g. *The Name of the Rose* or *The Seventh Seal*). This corpus, consisting of eleven films, is a relatively restricted corpus, but it adequately reflects some of the core ideas that are linked to the medieval as a dark age. It enabled us to offer insight in how the medieval as the Dark Ages is still relevant to us.

Methodologically, these films were analysed comparatively, focusing on recurring elements, underlying values and structures and narrative development. We focused on how the same kind of stories is told and retold, refashioned and revitalised. As Eco (1987: 67-68) wrote, 'the Middle Ages have never been reconstructed from scratch: we have always mended or patched them up, as something in which we still live'. We argue that the meaning of medievalist films is not to be found in their relation to the known historical facts, nor in the emphasis on the time in which these films were made or in the filmic genre conventions alone, but that the medievalist tradition plays a pivotal role without which there can be no proper understanding of these films. Therefore, a genealogist medievalist analysis was included in order to describe the origin and meaning of the elements on which these cinematic dark medieval worlds were built.

As a result, we do not consider the cinematic Dark Ages to be primarily a historical period. Whether a film is set in the ninth (*Pope Joan*), the thirteenth (*Le moine et la sorcière*), the fourteenth (*Häxan*, *The Seventh Seal*, *The Name of the Rose*, *La Passion Béatrice*, *Anazapta*, *The Reckoning* and *Black Death*) or the fifteenth century (*The Advocate*), the structure and values that underlie these films are to a large degree the same. Even when a film claims to be set on a very precise place and moment, as for example *The Pied Piper* opens in Hamelin, Midsummer Day, 1349, at noon, Torok (1976: 66) justly relocated the film to be 'anywhere out of the world'. The little village in the Dombes area is not primarily a village in thirteenth-century France, but in the words of De la Bretèque (2004: 9) 'un hameau intemporel' where 'l'Ailleurs remplace l'Autrefois'. When Tavernier in *La Passion Béatrice* relocated the Cenci-case from sixteenth-century Italy to fourteenth-century France, he transcended the purely historical and gave the story a lot more scope. Instead of focusing on what exactly happened in La Petrella De Salto in 1598, Tavernier offers a study about the corrupting effects of unbridled and unchecked power on the human soul. François de Cortemare is not (only) the cinematic pendant of Francesco Censi, but he is 'l'homme nu' or a symbol of mankind. The film analyses how he is shaped and conditioned by the extreme context in which he lives. As the central metaphor of the film goes, the film is not primarily about the sickness of the tree, but about how the poison got into its roots and infected the branches and the leaves from the inside.

Similarly, the meaning of the events, props or characters that are set in these cinematic dark worlds is primarily not to be found in their relation to the known historical facts. In most occasions, the meaning of these issues has been mediated by the (medievalist) tradition. In other words, they have been lifted out of history to become a symbol on their own. Consequently, there is no contradiction in including the Crusades (1095-1291), the Black Death (1347-1353) and witchcraft (essentially early-modern) into a single film, as *The Seventh Seal* did (see also Haydock, 2008: 11-12). This film is about having to start again or adapting after a traumatic experience

(returning from the Crusades during which Block lost his faith). It set in a disintegrating society, ruled by terror and fear where everything has become meaningless (the plague as a social disease). And this disintegration is symbolised in the fact that innocent young girls are being burned as scapegoats by a fanatic and dogmatic Church (the rationalist tradition on medieval witchcraft). Of all the films analysed, especially *Season of the Witch* stands out as an intertextual *playground*. This film freely uses the established meaning on medieval witchcraft, the plague, the Crusades and *The Seventh Seal*, and changes their meaning to construct a wholly different narrative related to the Hollywood Arthuriana. From this perspective, 'hyper-realism' is perhaps not the most accurate or best suited term, for these films are not constructing a 'realist' world, but one that is made from symbols and acquired meanings. These films, following the medievalist tradition, freely borrow and use elements from that tradition and incorporate them into a new whole. However, especially in the case of *Season of the Witch*, reading a film in this way demands a lot of historical and especially medievalist capital, which might threaten the perceived coherence of the film for the viewer.

Although the approach and selection of the corpus enabled us to define and characterise the core characteristics of a medievalist tradition that represents the Middle Ages as the Dark Ages in feature films, the corpus has its limitations. First, the corpus is relatively restricted and was based on a theoretical sampling. This enabled us to describe and analyse the core concepts of the Dark Ages imaginary more clearly, but this imaginary would be expanded and enriched if other films were to be included. Second, we approached the Dark Ages imaginary from a thematic perspective. We analysed what kind of stories were told in this setting, out of what elements this world was constructed, and how this related to the context in which the film was made. A lot of information, however, could have been gained by a synchronous selection of films. For example, what is the relation between medievalist films such as *Camelot* (Logan 1967) or *A Walk with love and Death* (Huston 1969) and *The Pied Piper* (Demy 1972), which are all medievalist films with links to the counterculture movement. And how do they relate with other contemporary medievalist films such as *The Lion in Winter* (Harvey 1968) or perhaps other non-medievalist films? The same could hold true when studying *Anazapta* and *Black Death* form the perspective of the New Horror cinema in Britain. Third, as a consequence of trying to describe a tradition, a more detailed analysis of each individual film is not always possible. Although this leads to a loss of detail and depth in the analysis of the individual films, this approach provided a larger image and a general concept of how the construct of the Dark Ages in the cinema is used and it enabled us to describe the core elements out of which the Dark Ages imaginary is constructed.

Moralising history or modern myths

Films on the Dark Ages do not primarily represent, analyse or explain the past, but they give meaning to it for a contemporary audience. We argue that films on the Dark Ages primarily offer *moralised history*, meant to *instruct* its contemporary audience. These films distinguish between good and bad and instruct us on how we should behave and act in contemporary society. In the medievalist tradition, there is no truth or lie in this kind of films, and considering them as distortions of history is missing what these films are all about. In fact, these films can be approached as *modern* or *secular myths*:

> Myth is understood as a societal story that expresses prevailing ideals, ideologies, values, and beliefs. More broadly, myth is an essential social narrative, a rich and enduring aspect of human existence, which draws from archetypical figures and forms to offer exemplary models for social life. (Lule, 2005: 102)

Films on the Dark Ages structure and give meaning to the world, and inspire their audience to overcome the evil in contemporary society as shown in these stories. More specifically, these cinematic Dark Ages worlds can be interpreted as *etiological myths*. These films tell the story of where our modern society came from and how it was created. Arguably, the stories that are told in these films are sometimes considered to be evident and pass unnoticed, which illustrates how deeply they are implanted in our minds (Levinson, 2012: 1 & 8; Breen and Corcoran, 1982: 128; McConnell, 1979: 3-20; Campbell, 1959).

As a result, we consider the Dark Ages imaginary essentially to be a narrative. In the fifth chapter we discussed the possibility of a Dark Ages iconography, how the period was represented as an age of filth and squalor, which gave it a 'realist' look. Additionally, this iconography supported the implicit grand narrative of progress, emphasising the hardship of medieval life. However, as is most clear in the narratives on the plague as a secular Great Flood Myth, despite the different look of the individual films (*The Pied Piper* in the magical-realist fairy tale style of Demy, *The Advocate* as a BBC period film and *Anazapta* as a horror film), these films essentially tell the same story. Moreover, this iconography is not unique to the Middle Ages as the Dark Ages and can be used in different narratives as well. Therefore, the narrative or the context in which this iconography appears is essential to its meaning. The (audio)visual elements serve as the flesh and blood around the narrative bones of the Dark Ages structure. Finally, as the additional analysis of *Agora* suggested, the Dark Ages can be constructed in a different iconography or historical period as well.

The Dark Ages imaginary

The two most defining structural characteristics of a Dark Ages society is its feudalism and dogmatism. In general, films on the Dark Ages take a critical stance towards power and the establishment and question dominant culture. The main message of these films is educating its viewers to be better (modern) citizens.

First, from a socio-economical and political point of view, medieval society in films on the Dark Ages is constructed according to the French nineteenth-century concept of the Middle Ages as a feudal age. This society is characterised by a usurping and often tyrannical elite that oppresses and exploits the common people. Due to the lack of centralised power (symbolised in the absence of the King), a unified administration or nation-wide supported laws, the local lord is an omnipotent ruler. Supported by the local elite, he rules with strict self-interest, and uses his people as a means to achieve his own goals. If the people do not comply, they can easily be whipped, imprisoned or executed. In *The Pied Piper*, every member of the elite had his own agenda, but in the end it were the people who had to build the cathedral, pay the taxes or had to go fighting in some war. In *Le moine et la sorcière*, when the count de Villars spends more than he earns, he simply takes the best fields of one of his serfs to turn these into ponds and raise and sell carps. Anastasius in *Pope Joan* demolishes poor houses to invest in profitable accommodation for the rich. And the seigneur in *The Advocate*, as a member of the Cathar Brotherhood, is fixing the prices to make maximum profits.

These films also reflect on the corrupting effects of power. The best example of this is *La Passion Béatrice*, where François de Cortemare, despite his omnipotence, cannot find meaning in life which brings him as a medieval Don Juan to a self-destructing quest for meaning. He not only raids and pillages his own villages, but defies God to the point of raping his own daughter before the wooden statue of the Virgin Mary. In *The Reckoning*, when lord De Guise is asked what brought him to commit his terrible crimes of abducting and abusing young boys, his answer is disturbingly simple: because he *could*. Power was his true religion, which also brought him to plot against the King. Also in *The Advocate*, the son of the lord abducts and kills young Jewish boys. These last two characters are inspired by Gilles de Rais, a medieval nobleman who was accused of raping and murdering a countless number of children. In fact, rape can be seen as a recurring metaphor for the relation between the elite and the people (e.g. *The Seventh Seal*, *The Name of the Rose*, *Le moine et la sorcière*, *La Passion Béatrice*, *The Advocate*, *Anazapta* and *The Reckoning*).

Another aspect of the critical stance of these films towards the medieval establishment, and contrary to the construct of the 'Age of Chivalry', is that there is no glory to be found on the battlefields defending the nation or one's honour. When the elite in films on the Dark Ages goes fighting, usually without any clear reason why,

they get captured, which means that a ransom has to be paid (which usually falls back on the shoulders of the people). Symbolic is the battle of Crecy that, regardless of a French, English or German perspective, is framed in terms of cowardice (*La Passion Béatrice*), unbridled cruelty (*Black Death*) or boy-soldiers 'dying as nobly as the next' (*The Pied Piper*).

Despite the claim that medievalist films are inherently anti-modern, anti-individualistic and anti-democratic, this is not the case for films on the Dark Ages. These films offer history from below, focusing on the people instead of Kings or knights. The protagonists in films on the Dark Ages are represented as being on the side of the people. Even when the protagonist is a knight, the son of a German Baron or the wife of the local lord, they never behave as such. Even more, contrary to Lindley's (2007: 23) concept of 'citizen-heroes', these protagonists can never fully join medieval society. Due to their rational and tolerant mindset, they do not fit in the dogmatic, patriarchal and feudal medieval society. These films are advocating a more leftist ideology, pleading for individual rights, a rational and impartial judiciary and public participation. A telling example can be found in *The Reckoning*, where lord De Guise in the end is not held accountable for plotting against the King, or destabilising the country, but he is overthrown by his own people for the crimes he committed against *them*. Where traditionally it is the Renaissance that ended the Middle Ages, in films on the Dark Ages the role of the French Revolution cannot be underestimated. During the post-Revolutionary debates, especially in mid-nineteenth-century France, the Ancient Regime as a whole was equalled to the age of feudalism and obscurantism.

Despite this revolutionary discourse, the role of the third estate in films on the Dark Ages remains ambivalent. Only in *La Passion Béatrice* the representatives of the third estate, Maitre Blanche and Lamartin, are constructed as eloquent and courteous characters. It is implied that these two characters, whose names refer to French nineteenth-century historians Louis Blanc and Alphonse de Lamartine, succeed the tyranny of François de Cortemare after he is killed. However, the seigneur in *The Advocate*, a wealthy businessman who bought his title and the land that came with it, and the Burgomaster in *The Pied Piper*, are as self-interested and power- and money-hungry as the feudal lords.

Second, from an intellectual point of view, the Dark Ages were dark because the light of Reason had not yet shone upon it. Due to the suffocating grip of a dogmatic Church on society, science or intellectual progress was made impossible. Any innovation or alternative truth was considered to be invalid or even heretical as it denied the Truth of Christ's teachings as written in the Scriptures. Nature was considered to be an imperfect mirror and sciences such as chemistry and mathematics could not add anything of importance. This dogmatism is seen as the basis of what made the Church

to be a fanatical and persecuting institution. Because the Jews, for example, do not follow what is written in the Scriptures, they are expelled from society. In *The Advocate*, where rats and pigs can testify in court, Jews cannot. This film also clearly indicates the absurdity of this dogmatic thinking as the Jewish apothecary surgeon is an educated man who is able to make sharp observations based upon the dead body of the murdered boy, which additionally contradicts the official theory. Similar, in *The Pied Piper*, the Church does not accept the rational and scientific reasoning of Melius, only based on the fact that he is a Jew. At the end of the film, Demy even makes a reference to what intolerance and anti-Semitism have led to in the twentieth century, referring to the Holocaust. By representing the Church as a persecuting elite of divergent thinkers, especially Jews, this religious dogmatism is sometimes linked to Nazism (see also *The Name of the Rose*, *Black Death* or *Agora*).

Just as the anti-Semitism, medieval misogyny can be related to a dogmatic Church. Women are considered to be inferior based on a literal and uncritical reading of *Genesis* 3 (e.g. *Pope Joan*, *The Reckoning* and *The Pied Piper*), the first letter of Saint Paul to Timothy (especially I *Tim* 2: 11-14, e.g. *Pope Joan* and *Agora*), the writings of the Church Fathers (*The Name of the Rose*) and the council of Macon (*The Advocate* and *La Passion Béatrice*). The witch in the rationalist tradition is the symbol par excellence of this deranged society characterised by ignorance, dogmatism and violence (*Häxan*, *The Seventh Seal*, *The Name of the Rose*, *The Advocate* and *Black Death*). In this specific case, the *Malleus Malleficarum* or the *Witches' Hammer* can be seen as the symbolic book that reflects the Church's virulent and violent misogyny. In the romantic tradition, the concept of the artificial and anti-nature worldviews of the Church is combined with their dogmatic misogyny. As many women had to flee mainstream society, as they were despised by the Church and often abused by their lord, they entered the woods where they could freely look into nature and see the world as it was. According to Michelet, the witch became the world's first modern scientist. This became most clear in her medical knowledge of the plants and herbs, and motivated by anti-feudalist feelings she was a healer for the people. The contrast with the clerical medical knowledge is emphasised as the Church could only offer words to the sick to help them die, where the witch could offer hope or even a cure.

Protagonists in films on the Dark Ages are not Kings, knights or warriors, but lawyers, artists, doctors and radical thinkers. These films value rational and critical thinking over prescriptive dogma. What unites the romantic witch and pagan, Classical, Arab or Jewish knowledge, is that they propagate non-dogmatic wisdom that resulted out of inductive or empirical observations of nature as it really is. Arguably, it is not the inherent value of these traditions that is being praised, but they are used to contrast the dogmatic anti-nature and artificial worldviews of the Church. This opens the door to a higher appreciation of women in a medieval cinematic context. Gender does not make the slightest difference when it are mental abilities

which are considered to be important. It is not because Arnaud is a man, in *La Passion Béatrice*, that this makes him as strong-willed, independent and intelligent as his sister Béatrice. As François de Cortemare tells her, she should have been his *son*. Another example is how Johanna in *Pope Joan* is able to become a just and wise Pope, but she has to do this in drag. A good ruler, as Johanna demonstrates, looks after her people. She is praised for being a *Papa Populi*, or a People's Pope as she builds facilities and infrastructure that benefit the well-being of the people. The same holds true for Elda in *Le moine et la sorcière*, who has knowledge of the shapes and the designs of plants and their medical qualities, which also benefits the well-being of the people of her village. Also Hypatia in *Agora* demonstrates that women, despite what the Church might think of them, have equal abilities to men.

However, there is a thin line between the feudal Dark Ages and the dogmatic Dark Ages. For example, not only the secular powers are considered to be feudal usurpers as also the Church, as for example in *The Name of the Rose*, exploits the peasantry and protects their own power and material wealth. In many other cases, the Church and the local lord are seen as interdependent (*The Pied Piper*, *The Advocate*, *Anazapta* and *The Reckoning*). In other words, where the lords control the serfs' body, the Church tries to control their souls. More important, however, is that ignorance can also be exploited by the Church and the lords. In *The Reckoning*, Nicholas offers a literal interpretation of *Romans* 8:18, in which he asks of the peasants to reconcile with their hard life, as the reward will come in the afterlife (something similar is promised to the peasants who bring food to the abbey in *The Name of the Rose*). In *The Advocate*, the seigneur and the village priest are exploiting the superstition and ignorance of the common people to get what they want. The village priest threatens with devilry to get his women, and the seigneur is able to shift the blame of his son's crimes to animals. Also fear is an ally of the Church. The more frightened the people become, the harder they run into the arms of the priests as Albertus Pictor says in *The Seventh Seal*. This is also why laughter is considered to be dangerous to Jorge of Burgos in *The Name of the Rose*. As fear leads to faith, and laughter kills fear, laughter is an enemy of faith. Jorge can also be seen as an example of the thin line between dogmatism and obscurantism. Is he killing these people to protect the power of the Church, or because he truly does not believe in it? The truth most likely lies in the middle. In *Black Death*, the bishop evens goes as far as to eradicate a village as it threatens to spread a rumour on how a necromancer could protect its villagers from the plague, while the Church could not.

According to Woods (2014: 8), there was 'no Exit' for characters in the 'world of medieval movies'. Nothing was allowed to change and 'its people are what they are'. The only thing that could improve their lives was waiting for the medieval to be 'reborn as the Renaissance'. Although this essentially humanist vision on the Middle

Ages is arguably the dominant perspective, films on the Dark Ages offer more exit-strategies than humbly waiting for the Renaissance to come.

The main solution that is offered as the answer against the medieval darkness, is education. It can not only improve the people's conditions during the medieval, as *Pope Joan* demonstrated on multiple occasions, it can also offer a way out of the medieval. For example, the revolution which ends the feudal Dark Ages is linked with education or is the result of becoming conscious of the world the people live in. As the French *philosophes* already noted, ignorance and servitude go hand in hand. In *The Name of the Rose*, it are William of Baskerville's sharp observational qualities and critical mind which brought him to detect the true culprit behind the murders. This, directly or indirectly, meant the end of both Jorge of Burgos, Bernardo Gui and the abbey entirely. The equally rational investigations of Martin and Nicholas in *The Reckoning* will also reveal the true culprit behind the murders on the boys. Once the artists, by means of avant-garde theatre, have enlightened the audience on the true nature of the crimes committed by lord De Guise, the people revolt and demand justice. This ends in a revolution against lord De Guise. Contrary to what the King's Justice thought, the people were not silent out of consent, but out of fear and mostly ignorance. They were simply not aware of the crimes committed by their lord. When Martin, the leader of the artists, announces that many performances of this new play will follow, while on the background De Guise's castle is burning, this holds the implicit idea of the end of feudalism, or the Norman Yoke, in England. At the same time, the artists have evolved from a traditional performing of the misogynist play, when cross-dressed men stilled played the parts of women, in *The Fall of Men* (based on *Genesis* 3) to a modern, socially relevant (Renaissance) play, characterised by gender equality as the woman of the company is now allowed to perform on stage. Education, in *Le moine et la sorcière*, through the continual succession of the wise woman of the woods who passes on her knowledge to another outcast girl, ensures the well-being of the people of the village.

On a meta-level, these films try to educate, or at least offer an exemplum to their audiences. *The Reckoning*, for example, more than only retelling the story of how the modern morality play was born, can be seen as a morality play of its own. It tries to inspire the audience to 'aim for higher standards of personal conduct in the mundane and spiritual spheres by illustrating the human potential for salvation or damnation' (Tydeman, 1986: 9). Johanna, in *Pope Joan*, led such an extraordinary life that she 'must not be forgotten'. The way she placed herself in the service of the people and how she remained true and faithful to her own ideals are compared to Saint Catherine. Johanna, similar to Hypatia in *Agora*, becomes a martyr whose example should inspire the people. Also the Passion of Béatrice, in *La Passion Béatrice*, shows the example of how she became the victim of her tyrannical father, till the point where she rebelled, and killed her father. She may inspire us, similar to

Charlotte Corday, not to subject ourselves to tyranny. *Le moine et la sorcière*, based on an exemplum, can be read as an exemplum on its own that teaches us to be tolerant towards minorities, and especially women. Finally, *Häxan*, especially in the version of 1941, was intended to be a direct lecture to inspire the audience to more rationality.

In fact, we can also learn from the bad examples given in these films. Osmund, for example, forms a warning that even rational and humane characters can radicalise in the violent and fanatic world of *Black Death*. Examples of what the lack of education may lead to are demonstrated in the case of the son of the lord. Either these characters can be weak and take after their cruel father, as Arnaud in *La Passion Béatrice*, they can be degenerate and warlike brutes such as Nicholas in *Anazapta* and Franz in *The Pied Piper*, or plain criminals such as the son of the lord in *The Advocate*. This seems to imply a critique on the hereditary feudal regime, where the son of the lord, regardless of his capacities, is ensured of his position. In a democracy, it would be possible to exclude these characters from power and elect more capable candidates.

Contrary to Wood's claim, medievalist films are not inherently pessimistic films in which the medieval characters have to wait on the birth of Renaissance to improve their lives. Apart from the idea of the Renaissance, we claim that there are three additional strategies in which the medieval can be overcome, or remediated: by revolution, resilience, or the plague. When a film is not set in a transitional age, the challenge is to find beauty and meaning during the medieval. In *The Seventh Seal*, Antonius Block finds goodness and meaning in the plague-stricken world, which can be seen by analogy as Bergman making peace with modernity. As this solution holds true for the entire Middle Ages, there is no need for a promise of the Renaissance. In *Pope Joan* and *Le moine et la sorcière*, the people are shown to be more resilient than they appear to be. They not only succeed in tempering the power of the count, they also succeed in holding off Etienne de Bourbon's elitist and artificial worldviews. And despite the patriarchal system, women play important roles in society as can be seen in *Pope Joan*.

Most films are, not coincidentally, set in the fourteenth century. Not only is this century a distant mirror, juxtaposing the calamitous fourteenth century with the calamitous twentieth, but also dramatically, it offers the possibility to construct the *nec plus ultra* of the Dark Ages, just before the first glimpses of the light of modernity. In other words, it is not only a calamitous, but also a pivotal age. This is reflected in the Revolution which offers hope in the times to come (*La Passion Béatrice*, *The Name of the Rose* and *The Reckoning*). In some cases, however, the medieval darkness is so impervious, that it would take much more drastic measures to bring modernity. This was the case in *The Pied Piper*, *The Advocate*, and *Anazapta* which constructed the plague according to the tradition that originated in the 'Gothic Epidemiology'. This tradition considered the Black Death as the necessary evil to free European society

from the Middle Ages. We argue that this tradition has been adapted in the cinema according to a secularised version of the Great Flood Myth. As this plague only killed those responsible for the darkness of medieval society, this paved the way for better times to come, or, in other words, modernity. Still, these films inspire their audience to follow the good example. By telling the story of the Black Death the same way as in the Great Flood Myth, a secular exemplum is shown that should inspire the audience. These films remind us of what may happen if we, again, should persist in medieval wickedness.

Functionality of these films

By constructing the Middle Ages as the Dark Ages, these films essentially glorify modern society. In *Häxan*, for example, the barbaric medieval past was directly juxtaposed with the civilised and scientifically advanced contemporary society. Also, Evans, in his book *The Criminal Prosecution and Capital Punishment of Animals* ended his story in the present, expliclity aimed to contrast the 'primitive' and 'superstitious' Middle Ages with modern and civilised society. *The Advocate*, inspired by this novel, does exactly the same thing, but without making the contrast between the medieval and the modern expliclit in the film itself. The films of this corpus clearly attest what Hollister (1992: 7) called the 'indestructible fossil of the self-congratulatory Renaissance humanism', implying that we have outgrown these medieval anomalies.

However, this does not mean that these films are blindly praising modern society. In *The Advocate*, Richard Courtois left the city because it was a place of politics and corruption. But his idealised countryside village of Abbeville soon proved to be a place of abuse, exploitation and, above all, fear. Just as Don Quixote, Courtois was misled by reading too much idealising medieval literature. Modernity, despite its inherent flaws, is still the best of all possible worlds. In *The Seventh Seal*, it were Bergman's issues *with* modernity that formed the basis of the film. But instead of creating a nostalgic construct of the medieval, Bergman chose to project his fears on the Dark Ages. In the end, Bergman found beauty and meaning in the medieval darkness. In other words, there is beauty and goodness to find in modernity as well, even when it may appear not to be so.

More than only glorifying the present, these films also remind us where modern society came from and what obstacles had to be overcome in order to get there. This is related to the educational aspect of these films as they not only show the medieval darkness, but also demonstrate how we overcame this darkness. It is easy to accept present society at face value, but if we no longer defend it, the Dark Ages, or elements of it, could return. More than only glorifying modern society, these films

also offer an inherent warning. In order to prevent history from repeating itself, people must first become aware of their history. Michelet (1966: 285) wrote in *La sorcière*: 'L'esprit nouveaux est tellement vainqueur, qu'il oublie ses combats, daigne à peine aujourd'hui se souvenir la victoire'. And also Charles Fellens (18--: 5 & 7), in what he called the 'abhorrent' and 'deplorable' events in his novel set in feudal society, gives a similar reason why he wrote this book: 'Qu'on le lise, enfin, et que les plus timorés apprennent, à la lecture de ces pages ténébreuses et funestes, à se débarrasser à jamais des étreintes de l'ignorance, de l'esclavage et de la superstition.' Films on the Dark Ages celebrate modernity as a warning to keep it that way.

Finally, what brings a filmmaker to return to these century-old ideas of the Middle Ages as the Dark Ages, and revive and refashion them into film? In 1908 *Le Droit de Seigneur* by the brothers Pathé and in 1910 an Italian production *Feudal Rights*, already expressed anti-feudal sentiments that are still reflected in more recent films (see supra, 2.2.3, pp. 64-69). However, based on our (not-exhaustive) corpus, before *The Pied Piper* of 1972, only two, but highly influential, Scandinavian films, *Häxan* (1922) and *The Seventh Seal* (1957) constructed the Middle Ages as the dark ages as defined here. The influence of *The Seventh Seal* on *The Pied Piper*, focusing on a family of travelling artists, set in the context of the plague, is also very visible. Except for *Häxan* (1922), *The Seventh Seal* (1956) and *The Pied Piper* (1972), the rest of the corpus dates from the last twenty-five years (1986-2010). De la Bretèque (2004: 23) already wrote that medieval topics in the cinema come in waves and are easily forgotten for long periods, but are never fully absent. It should be noted, however, that the Dark Ages imaginary is not exclusively bound to the cinema as also other media can express these ideas. In the footnotes we occasionaly referred to newspapers, websites or even Twitter where similar or related ideas could be found as well. In addition, many of the individual elements related to the Dark Ages imaginary can be found in different times in different filmic traditions as well. In *Ivanhoe* (Thorpe 1952), for example, the concept of Jewish medicine, linked to witchcraft is very present (see infra, 4.2.2b, p. 179). However, as discussed at the end of chapter five, including elements from the Dark Ages imaginary does not mean that the narrative as a whole constructs the Middle Ages as the Dark Ages.

Still, the great majority of the films of our corpus is to be situated from the last quarter of the twentieth century onwards. A possible explanation would be the inherent anticlerical vision of films on the Dark Ages which makes it difficult to get this kind of stories into mainstream film production. Only in Scandinavia, with a strong Reformist tradition, Christensen and Bergman made influential films on the Dark Ages. Perhaps not coincidentally, Demy, another auteur in a country with a strong anticlerical tradition constructs the Dark Ages in a context of the counterculture-movement of these days. However, after *The Name of the Rose* as a

novel in 1980, and especially after its cinematic palimpsest in 1986 by Jean-Jacques Annaud, this kind of Middle Ages became popular. In his essay *Dreaming of the Middle Ages*, Eco (1987: 61) famously wrote that 'it seems that people like the Middle Ages' and mentioned a 'neomedieval wave'. This is reflected in the corpus with five films in less than ten years (Marshall, 2007: 6) (*The Name of the Rose* 1986, *Le moine et la sorcière* 1987, *La Passion Béatrice* 1987 and *The Advocate* 1993).[107]

For example, the contemporary situation in *Black Death* (or *Agora*, for that matter) is more clearly linked to religious fanaticism in a post 9/11 climate. In this context, a plea for more tolerance or a warning against radicalisation can be expected. However, in most cases it is not clear as to what contemporary aspect in specific these films were reacting against. This leads to much speculation. Was Jorge of Burgos or the Dolcenites in *The Name of the Rose* a reflection of the fanaticism of the Red Brigades as was argued in relation with the novel (Rosenblum, 1992; Cannon, 1992: 896)? In the filmic version, however, it was especially the role of the inquisitor Bernardo Gui which was linked to Nazism (see Haydock, 2008: 32). More importantly, what characterises these films on the Dark Ages is their continued relevance. This kind of stories is always pertinent or relevant to modern society. *The Advocate*, inspired by a novel dating back to 1906, for example, still receives new meanings whenever a new critic writes about it. When the film premiered, the critics interpreted the film as an accusation of a special treatment of the rich, or about how 'easy it is to pervert the court of justice' (Berardinelli, s.d.; Maslin, 1994). Scarcely ten years later, Mitchell (2002: 1222) read the film in the context of migration or how 'we look today with suspicion on foreigners; we refuse to give up our local customs for the rationalism of an international law: we are willing to be lied to and dallied with as long as the lies and dalliance reinforce our feelings of superiority'. Again, not ten years later, Murray (2011) interpreted the scene where Father Albertus abused women under threat of losing their soul as an analogy for priests abusing boys and the cover-up operations of the Church. In other words, this kind of stories has a continual appeal and relevance to modern society. Following what Woods (2002: 72-73) wrote on *The Advocate*, we argue that the film is perhaps best read as a story on 'human identity' in general: 'we are lured into sifting, and a certain distance, caring about questions of legal, political and moral philosophy that give us back a troubling, ambivalent reflection of our human image. Thus are we drawn to question a little more deeply and truly who we are'.

As Woods (2014: 178) ended his book *The Medieval Filmscape*: 'Finally, it all comes down to identity […]. We seek ourselves in the mirror of medieval film; And find

[107] If we consider films which have been left out the corpus but lie close to it as for example: *Anchoress* (Newby 1993), *L'an Mil* (De la Roucefoucauld 1985), *Cadfael* (Theakston 1994-1996) this indicates in the same direction.

ourselves there. How could we not?'. What Woods did not address, is whose identity he was writing about. Identity issues in films on the Dark Ages proved to be relatively ambiguous. The BBC-production of *The Advocate*, with an English director and an impressive British cast, is essentially based on the French literary genre of the fabliaux. It constructs a feudal divide in society that echoes French-nineteenth-century debates, and uses the plague according to a German-born concept of the plague. Also *The Reckoning*, although set in England, constructs a French feudal divide due to the absence of the King, although presented according to the myth of the Norman Yoke, including a secular version of Michelet's romantic witch, and the story ends with a (French) revolution. Despite the English tradition in which the King is usually a positive character, in this film he is a self-interested politician who only acts when his own position is threatened. He does not accuse De Guise of his child murdering when he needs his troops, but when De Guise plots against the King, then the King's Justice appears on the scene.

The values that underlie these films are essentially cosmopolitan, leftist, and democratic which hold true for every nation. Still, based upon the corpus selected, projecting these values in the Middle Ages as the Dark Ages appears to be a European way of remembering the Middle Ages. No American made film, to my knowledge, constructs the medieval in a similar way. In *Season of the Witch*, for example, the film referred to *The Seventh Seal*, the rationalist and the romantic tradition of representing witchcraft, but used these elements to inscribe it into the essentially American tradition of the Hollywood Arthuriana.

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Summary

The aim of this study was to identify and describe a specific, recurring and coherent construct of the Middle Ages as the Dark Ages in feature films. By approaching the medieval as the time of feudalism, dogmatism and of general primitiveness and extremity, we moved away from the focus on kings, knights and nations, that continues to dominate the critical literature. Methodologically, I argue that the meaning of medievalist films is not to be found in their relation to the known historical facts, nor by emphasising the time in which these films were made or in the filmic genre conventions alone, but that the medievalist tradition (i.e. the continued post-medieval process of reshaping the medieval as *our* significant other to modernity) plays a pivotal role without which there can be no proper understanding of these films. Therefore, a genealogist medievalist analysis aimed at describing the origin and (traditional) meaning of the medievalist elements of these cinematic dark medieval worlds was included. The results show that the Dark Ages in the cinema are for the most part an exclusively European way of dealing with the medieval heritage, and that nineteenth-century conceptions of the medieval continue to shape this cinematic memory. This was called the *Dark Ages imaginary*, or the sum of our beliefs about what constitutes the medieval as a dark age as expressed in feature films.

In order to detect patterns in the stories modern cinema tells its audiences, as well as the core values propagated by these films, we applied a structural narrative analysis. Essentially, these films revolve around the binary conflict between a rational (proto-)modern protagonist and the dark medieval world he or she inhabits. The way the protagonist opposes the oppression, irrationality, dogmatism, intolerance, anti-Semitism and other elements ascribed to the Dark Ages is considered to be relevant to contemporary society. Although these films are closely related to a self-congratulatory historiography glorifying (scientific) progress, they always include an inherent warning not to let the elements we ascribe to the Dark Ages return.

Samenvatting

Dit proefschrift beschrijft en analyseert een specifiek, coherent en terugkerend construct van de middeleeuwen als de donkere middeleeuwen in narratieve speelfilm. Door te focussen op een construct van de middeleeuwen als een tijd van onderdrukking, uitbuiting, dogma, intolerantie, barbarij en ziekte, werd afgeweken van de ridders, koningen en naties die de literatuur overheersen. Op methodologisch vlak werd afstand genomen van een al te strikte historische analyse die enkel nagaat in hoeverre deze films de gekende historische feitelijkheden getrouw naar het scherm vertalen. Ook een exclusieve focus op de invloed van de productiecontext of een al te strikte tekstuele genrebenadering schieten op zich tekort om deze films te analyseren. Dit proefschrift toont aan dat een aanvullende mediëvalistische analyse (i.e. het betrekken van de eeuwenoude traditie waarin de middeleeuwen als een cultureel construct dienen als een toetssteen voor de moderniteit) essentieel is om de betekenis van deze films ten volle te begrijpen. De films van het corpus werden aan een dergelijke analyse onderworpen om te bepalen uit welke mediëvalistische elementen bestonden, uit welke traditie deze kwamen en hoe deze betekenis te verlenen. De resultaten tonen aan dat de donkere middeleeuwen vooral bestaan uit elementen van een quasi-exclusieve Europeaanse oorsprong, en dat vooral (Franse) negentiende-eeuwse concepten nog steeds heel erg invloedrijk zijn. Dit geheel werd de *verbeelding van de donkere middeleeuwen* genoemd, of de som van alle elementen waaruit het construct van de middeleeuwen als de donkere middeleeuwen in speelfilms is opgebouwd.

Om onderliggende narratieve patronen en terugkerende waarden te ontdekken, werden deze films ook aan een structureel narratieve analyse onderworpen. De resultaten tonen aan dat deze films in de kern een verhaal vertellen dat gebaseerd is op een conflict tussen een Verlichte en (proto-)moderne protagonist en de donkere tijd waarin hij of zij leeft. Dit conflict wordt bovendien ook als relevant gezien voor onze moderne samenleving. Hoewel deze films schatplichtig zijn aan het humanistisch discours dat de moderniteit en de (vooral wetenschappelijke) vooruitgang verheerlijkt ten nadele van de donkere middeleeuwen, waarschuwen deze films tegelijk het hedendaagse publiek dat deze periode niet mag terugkeren.

Résumé

L'objectif de cette étude était de décrire et d'analyser dans le film narratif une construction spécifique, cohérente et récurrente du Moyen Age comme l'âge des ténèbres. En mettant l'accent sur la conception du Moyen Age comme une période d'oppression, d'exploitation, de dogmes, d'intolérance, de barbarie et de maladie, le film narratif s'est écarté des récits de chevaliers, de rois et de nations qui sont omniprésents dans la littérature. Sur le plan méthodologique nous nous sommes écartés d'une analyse historique trop réductrice qui se limite à examiner dans quelle mesure ces films traduisent fidèlement les faits historiques connus à l'écran. Dans le même ordre d'idées, une focalisation exclusive sur l'impact du contexte de production ou une approche de genre textuel trop stricte s'avèrent insuffisantes pour analyser ces films. Cette thèse montre qu'une analyse médiévale complémentaire (à savoir la prise en compte de la tradition séculaire du Moyen Age comme une construction culturelle servant de pierre de touche pour la modernité) est essentielle pour comprendre pleinement le sens de ces films. Les films du corpus ont été soumis à une telle analyse pour déterminer de quels éléments médiévaux ils se composent, de quelle tradition ils proviennent et comment leur donner sens. Les résultats démontrent que l'âge des ténèbres se compose principalement d'éléments d'origine presque exclusivement européenne, et que des conceptions (françaises) du XIXe siècle sont encore très influentes. Cet ensemble a été appelé *l'imagination de l'âge des ténèbres*, ou la somme de tous les éléments qui composent la conception du Moyen Age comme l'âge des ténèbres dans les longs métrages.

Afin de mettre à jour les modèles de récit sous-jacents et les valeurs récurrentes, ces films ont également été soumis à une analyse narrative structurelle. Les résultats révèlent que ces films racontent en soi une histoire qui repose sur un conflit entre, d'une part, un protagoniste éclairé et (proto)moderne et, d'autre part, l'époque sombre où il/elle vit. Ce conflit est également considéré comme étant pertinent pour notre société moderne. Bien que ces films soient redevables au discours humaniste qui glorifie la modernité et le progrès (principalement scientifique) aux dépens de l'âge des ténèbres, ils avertissent en effet en même temps le public contemporain que cette période ne peut pas refaire surface.

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